



MARCHING TOWARD A U.S.-NORTH KOREA SUMMIT: THE HISTORICAL CASE FOR OPTIMISM, PESSIMISM, AND CAUTION

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The history of denuclearization efforts on the Korean Peninsula gives reason for pessimism, caution, and optimism. Attempting to critically engage that history can help the United States narrow uncertainty, prepare for a long diplomatic process should one transpire, and perhaps learn some tactical lessons.

No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.

—Heraclitus

“Here we go again.” “It’s Groundhog Day with North Korea.” “We’ve seen this script before.” These sorts of refrains have been common among North Korea watchers — and those who play them on TV — ahead of the summit slated for June 12 in Singapore between North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong Un, and President Donald Trump. After significant brinkmanship over whether the meeting would take place, the on-again, off-again summit looks likely to be held as originally planned. The United States has engaged North Korea in two major denuclearization processes, not to mention separate inter-Korean and multilateral efforts, over the past quarter-century. All have failed to produce the complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization that the United States has sought on the Korean Peninsula.¹ Some skeptical of the bilateral summit charge that this history of failure is likely to repeat itself. Meanwhile, optimists suggest that something new in the upcoming process has opened the possibility of a different outcome.²

History can be a useful guide to avoid repeating mistakes, but events are rarely as neat and tidy as a sound bite seems to suggest. The history of nuclear negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang, as well as multilateral discussions such as the six-

party talks, is far more complex than most voices in the media and policy circles acknowledge. This history offers cause for pessimism, optimism, and caution about current prospects for denuclearization.³

Pessimism: Denuclearization Is Harder Now Than During Past Efforts

Many of those who are pessimistic about the Trump-Kim summit point to failed efforts to achieve complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization and ask why this time should be any different. In one sense, the pessimists are not pessimistic enough. North Korea’s nuclear program has advanced significantly since the last major diplomatic efforts at denuclearization. In the intervening years, the possibility of denuclearization has become even more distant. This section contrasts the situation today with the state of the North Korean nuclear threat when the 1994 Agreed Framework and the joint statement of the 2005 six-party talks were reached. Seen through that lens, contentions that history may repeat itself underestimate the current challenge.

In Brief: The Agreed Framework and Six-Party Talks

There have been two major diplomatic efforts to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear program.

1 The effort toward complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization is known as CVID.

2 The South Korean government has been at the forefront of the optimists, arguing that this round of summits could portend a different outcome than past attempts. See its website dedicated to the series of summits — called Peace, A New Start — and articles such as that by Xu Aiyang and Sohn JiAe, “Inter-Korean Summit Makes Headlines Around the World,” *Peace, A New Start: 2018 Inter-Korean Summit*, May 1, 2018, <http://www.korea.net/Government/Current-Affairs/National-Affairs/view?affairId=656&subId=640&articleId=158382>. For a critique arguing that history suggests greater pessimism around the summits, see Bruce Klingner, “Nice Try, North Korea and South Korea, But Your Pledges Are Airy, Empty Confections,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-klingsner-north-korea-declaration-is-mostly-empty-promises-20180501-story.html>.

3 “Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” is standard language that has been used throughout post-Cold War diplomacy with North Korea on its nuclear program. It is in the 1992 “Joint Declaration of South And North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” the 1994 Agreed Framework, the 2005 “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks,” and the 2018 Panmunjom Declaration, among other agreements. As operationalized in these agreements and pursued in practice, the phrase refers to the elimination of North Korean facilities that can produce fissile materials for nuclear weapons and verified removal of any nuclear weapons on the peninsula.

In the early 1990s, North Korea initiated an international crisis by taking provocative steps toward developing a nuclear bomb: removing fuel rods from its five-megawatt plutonium reactor at Yongbyon and initiating its withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, in which North Korea had legally pledged to forego nuclear weapons. The United States engaged Pyongyang in an effort to resolve the crisis, and the two sides signed the Agreed Framework in 1994. In short, North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for energy and economic assistance, security guarantees, and political promises, including specific efforts toward the normalization of bilateral relations.⁴

The Agreed Framework faced challenges in implementation, however, and collapsed in late 2002 and early 2003. The United States, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia initiated the six-party talks later in 2003.⁵ Seeking to distinguish between the 1994 framework's temporary freeze on nuclear production and a more comprehensive and lasting goal, the six countries announced, after two years and four rounds of negotiations, that

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they “unanimously reaffirmed that the goal of the Six-Party Talks is the verifiable denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula in a peaceful manner.”⁶ The 2005 joint statement of those talks laid out the basic principles of a nuclear deal that would be refined more specifically in a pair of implementation agreements two years later. In late 2008, however, the participating countries reached an impasse over important technical verification

issues. Whereas in 1994 North Korea had pledged to freeze its nuclear program, in 2005 Pyongyang promised to abandon all nuclear weapons and programs in exchange for energy and economic assistance, security guarantees, normalized diplomatic relations, and negotiations toward a “permanent peace regime.”⁷ Although the two sets of negotiations were different in important ways, the broad structure was consistent: North Korea promised to move away from nuclear weapons in exchange for a similar basket of incentives.

Denuclearization Today

The North Korean nuclear program of 2018 is not the nuclear program of 1994, when Washington and Pyongyang negotiated the Agreed Framework. It is not even the nuclear program of 2005, when the six-party talks produced its joint statement. Since these diplomatic milestones, Pyongyang's nuclear development and long-range missiles have advanced in major ways, crossing a series of critical technical barriers. These programs have grown significantly more difficult to reverse since earlier denuclearization efforts were underway.

Since the 1990s, North Korea's nuclear weapons program has grown from a theoretical capability to an actual one. North Korea's first nuclear test occurred in 2006, a year after the joint statement of the six-party talks was released. Before this, the North Korean leadership could not be confident that their efforts to build a nuclear bomb would actually work. Indeed, the North's first nuclear test produced more of a whimper than a bang. The explosion yielded less than one kiloton, prompting a variety of theories about why it had been a low-yield test. As such, the fundamental challenge for these earlier negotiations was to *prevent* North Korea from building a nuclear weapon and to persuade Pyongyang to roll back its attendant programs. These efforts resembled something like the more recent nuclear negotiations between Iran and the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany in the sense that American negotiators and their allies could capitalize on North Korea's uncertainty about whether it could succeed in building a bomb and crossing the nuclear-weapons threshold.

Today, by contrast, North Korean leader Kim Jong

4 For a more thorough overview of the 1994 Agreed Framework, see Kelsey Davenport, “The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance,” *Arms Control Association*, August 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/agreedframework>.

5 For an overview of the six-party talks, see Kelsey Davenport, “The Six-Party Talks at a Glance,” *Arms Control Association*, July 2017, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>.

6 Department of State, “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks,” Sept. 19, 2005, <https://www.state.gov/p/eap/regional/c15455.htm>.

7 “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks.”

Un controls a nuclear arsenal that has benefited from six tests. His is not a start-up business seeking proof of concept but, rather, an established enterprise with a demonstrated ability to detonate increasingly powerful nuclear weapons. After the 2006 nuclear test produced a lower-than-expected yield, then-leader Kim Jong Il ordered a second test, in 2009, that erased any doubt about North Korea's basic ability to build and detonate a nuclear weapon.⁸ North Korea's third nuclear test, in 2013, came amid Pyongyang's pronouncements that the test provided critical information that would help the regime's effort to miniaturize a nuclear weapon in order to mount it on a missile. The third test may also have utilized uranium in its bomb design. The regime's previous tests used plutonium, thus, testing weapons using this second path to the bomb expanded its capabilities. North Korea's fourth test, in 2016, demonstrated the country's thermonuclear capability for the first time.⁹ The fifth and sixth tests, in 2016 and 2017 respectively, sought bigger yields still.¹⁰ Rather than preventing North Korea from crossing the nuclear-weapons threshold, the denuclearization challenge has become much harder: Somehow, the genie must be put back in the bottle.

Meanwhile, North Korea has steadily advanced its ability to develop, test, and field operational ballistic missiles that can deliver nuclear weapons. Critically, the regime has diversified its ballistic missile force to create a survivable second-strike capability, thereby securing an essential element to deter its primary adversary, the United States.¹¹ In 1994, North Korea was capable of striking some American bases and allies but not the U.S.

homeland. That year — the same year Washington and Pyongyang signed the Agreed Framework — North Korea began producing its Nodong medium-range ballistic missile and fielded the missile the following year. The Nodong could strike South Korea and most of Japan but still not the United States.¹² In 1998, North Korea flight-tested its Taepo Dong-1 prototype, which flew over Japan, rattling the Japanese government in particular and accelerating Tokyo's cooperation with Washington on missile defense. The flight test ushered in a new round of missile diplomacy between the United States and North Korea. Pyongyang maintained a unilateral moratorium on long-range-missile flight tests for six years, refraining from launching another Taepo Dong rocket until 2006.¹³ As the two sides negotiated the Agreed Framework and, later, the joint statement of the six-party talks, North Korea did not have the capability to hit the United States with its missiles.

Today, however, North Korea is perilously close to having a demonstrated delivery vehicle to strike the continental United States with nuclear weapons. Since coming to power in December 2011, Kim Jong Un has ordered scores of missile launches, including long- and short-range ballistic missiles. Both long- and short-range ballistic missiles can test technologies used in the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).¹⁴ In 2017, North Korea conducted three ICBM flight tests. After the third test, Kim Jong Un declared his nuclear deterrent complete.¹⁵ While this claim was probably premature,¹⁶ Kim expressed confidence that his country had attained a complete package of miniaturized nuclear weapons and survivable

8 For more on North Korea's first nuclear test, see Emma Chanlett-Avery and Sharon Squassoni, *North Korea's Nuclear Test: Motivations, Implications, and U.S. Options* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, Oct. 24, 2006), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/RL33709.pdf>.

9 Thermonuclear weapons, also known as hydrogen bombs, utilize fusion and can produce a more powerful blast, while atomic weapons utilize fission. For a short and readable article on the difference and its application to North Korea, see Stephanie Pappas, "Hydrogen Bomb vs. Atomic Bomb: What's the Difference?" *Live Science*, Sept. 22, 2017, <https://www.livescience.com/53280-hydrogen-bomb-vs-atomic-bomb.html>.

10 "North Korea Nuclear Tests: What Did They Achieve?" *BBC*, Sept. 3, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-17823706>.

11 Patrick McEachern, "North Korea's Nuclear Doctrine Under Kim Jong Un," APLN Policy Brief, Dec. 21, 2017, http://www.a-pln.org/_mobile/briefings/briefings_view.html?seq=1030.

12 "No Dong 1," Center for Strategic and International Studies Missile Defense Project, accessed June 1, 2018, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/no-dong/>.

13 Alex Wagner, "Albright Visits North Korea; Progress Made on Missile Front," *Arms Control Association*, November 2000, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2000_11/albrighttalks. "North Korea Test-Fires Several Missiles," *New York Times*, July 4, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/04/world/asia/04cnd-korea.html>.

14 The U.N. Security Council has criticized North Korea's ballistic missile development and demanded the suspension of "all ballistic missile related activity" in a series of resolutions since North Korea's 2006 Taepo Dong-2 launch. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1695, adopted in 2006, demands that North Korea suspend "all ballistic missile related activity." The Security Council's demand is not limited to missiles of a certain range given the ability to test components of long-range missiles using short-range launches. Likewise, the resolutions' wording effectively demands the cessation of rocket launches configured as a space launch for satellites as these launches also can be used to test and refine technologies for long-range ballistic missiles.

15 Korean Central News Agency, "Kim Jong Un Guides Test Fire of ICBM Hwasong 15," Nov. 29, 2017.

16 Kim's claim is probably premature given some additional technical hurdles and unfinished business on some systems such as the GORAE-class ballistic missile submarine.

delivery vehicles that could reach the continental United States.¹⁷

The main components of North Korea's fissile material production have also shifted significantly. In the leadup to the 1994 Agreed Framework, North Korea had only one fissile material production site: the plutonium program at Yongbyon. The site was known, surveilled, and, in theory, could have been verifiably frozen with reasonable confidence. By the time of the six-party talks, the United States was aware of a nascent and covert North Korean uranium enrichment program that violated its Agreed Framework pledges. The CIA publicly disclosed to Congress its judgment that North Korea had started this program in 2000.¹⁸ Other assessments date the origins of Pyongyang's uranium enrichment as early as 1996.¹⁹ Regardless of whether Pyongyang started its uranium enrichment program then or in 2000, plutonium

than its plutonium program in absolute terms. One unclassified research project estimated that by 2020, North Korea's only five-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon could produce 14 nuclear weapons from plutonium, while two centrifuge plants could produce about 56 weapons from uranium.²⁰ Put another way, the North Korean uranium enrichment program produces far more fissile material for nuclear weapons today, and its higher annual output is central to the growth of Pyongyang's arsenal over time.

When it comes to trying to negotiate verifiable denuclearization, the distinction between the plutonium and uranium routes to the bomb is critical. In 2010, North Korean officials showed the uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon to a prominent U.S. nongovernmental delegation. The manner and speed of the facility's construction suggested strongly that this was not the country's

first enrichment facility.²¹

Commercial satellite imagery and other publicly available sources offer no proof of a third enrichment facility, but that should not provide much comfort. It is not clear how many uranium enrichment sites North Korea has because they are easier to hide than their plutonium counterparts.

This should concern American policymakers as verification was the shoal upon which the six-party talks foundered.²²

During those talks, Washington wanted to conduct soil and nuclear waste samples to verify North Korea's claims; Pyongyang refused. The "Second Phase Actions for the Implementation of the September 2005 Joint Statement," agreed to on Oct. 3, 2007, outlined what would be required of North Korea to disable its five-megawatt reactor. The agreement did not explicitly require North

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production was North Korea's sole route to the bomb in 1994 and its primary but not exclusive nuclear production capability in 2005.

Today, North Korea acquires substantially more fissile material for weapons from its well-established uranium enrichment facilities than it does from its plutonium program. Pyongyang's uranium program also has more growth potential

17 Korean Central News Agency, "Kim Jong Un Guides Test Fire of ICBM Hwasong 15," Nov. 29, 2017.

18 CIA, Untitled Unclassified Estimate, Nov. 19, 2002, GALE Document Number KQUSOP990053924. Former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf later noted that Pakistani nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan delivered centrifuges to North Korea in 2000, as recounted by Siegfried Hecker, former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Siegfried S. Hecker, "What I Found in North Korea: Pyongyang's Plutonium Is No Longer the Only Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 9, 2010, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/northeast-asia/2010-12-09/what-i-found-north-korea?page=show>.

19 A prominent North Korean defector claimed that a decision to enrich may have been made as early as 1996, and the South Korean foreign minister asserted the same. North Korea imports of the critical components followed in subsequent years. Kim Yong Hun, "North Korea Obtained HEU from Pakistan," *DailyNK*, Aug. 11, 2010, <http://english.dailynk.com/english/read.php?catald=nk02200&num=6680>. Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Started Uranium Program in 1990s, South Says," *New York Times*, Jan. 6, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/07/world/asia/07korea.html>.

20 For an excellent technical discussion, see David Albright, "North Korea's Nuclear Capabilities: A Fresh Look," Aug. 9, 2017, <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/north-koreas-nuclear-capabilities-a-fresh-look-power-point-slides/10>. Albright cautions that these estimates are "rough" and require a variety of informed assumptions about North Korea's nuclear operations, bomb design, and other variables. Numbers cited here are rounded to the nearest whole nuclear weapon and reflect median estimates for "weapons equivalents."

21 Siegfried S. Hecker, "Nuclear Developments in North Korea," (Stanford University: Center for International Security and Cooperation, Mar. 20, 2012), <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/HeckerPBNCfinal.pdf>.

22 Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011).

Korea to allow these samples to be taken but stipulated that disablement would proceed in a “verifiable” manner.²³ Washington interpreted this to mean it could use sampling to verify Pyongyang’s actions under the second-phase agreement before it proceeded. Pyongyang, however, saw things differently: It wanted to save the issue of sampling for a “third phase” agreement, at which point it could either demand additional concessions and use the sampling issue as a bargaining chip, or not agree to sampling at all.²⁴ Verification is, of course, central to any sustainable agreement. And the devil is in the details. These kinds of technocratic aspects, which political leaders tend not to ponder, have derailed high-level, multiyear diplomatic initiatives. Diplomatic efforts could again sink over critical technical details if negotiators do not learn from the past.

While Kim Jong Il may have hoped during negotiations in the 1990s and again during the six-party talks that his and his father’s decades-long efforts to develop nuclear weapons would someday provide a deterrent against U.S. invasion, his son, Kim Jong Un, has this capability. In the past, North Korea’s nuclear program was aspirational. Today, it is an active part of the country’s national defense. Before, verifying a deal focused primarily on a plutonium program was difficult. Now, the prominence of the uranium program in addition to the plutonium program makes the challenge even greater. It is not the same river.

Caution: New Leaders on Both Sides

In addition to the technical advancements in Pyongyang’s nuclear program since the last two major diplomatic efforts, important political changes have taken place in North Korea and the United States. During the Agreed Framework negotiations and the six-party talks, Kim Jong Il was effectively at the helm. Although North Korea’s founder and charismatic leader, Kim Il Sung, was in power until his death in 1994, and famously held important roles such as receiving former President

Jimmy Carter in Pyongyang amid the crisis, Kim Il Sung told a Western reporter that by 1992 his son was running the country.²⁵ Kim Il Sung tapped his son as his successor in 1980 and gradually shifted power to him. As such, the Agreed Framework and six-party talks were, for North Korea, essentially a Kim Jong Il production. Today, Kim Jong Un is in charge and his personal stamp can be seen on nuclear diplomacy.

Kim the youngest differs substantially in ruling style and approach from his father, something that matters greatly for the current round of summits. Kim Jong Il was an introverted micro-manager. Living in the shadow of his larger-than-life father, North Korean founder Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il closely controlled process and avoided public appearances. While Kim Il Sung was known for his charisma, Kim Jong Il could not even manage to give the annual new year’s day address. Instead, he instituted a policy of publishing the annual statement as an editorial in three newspapers.²⁶ Imagine if an American president decided to forego the annual State of the Union address and instead published his views on the White House website. That would be less of a break from past precedent than Kim Jong Il’s decision. Kim Jong Il gave one — or possibly two — extremely short speeches in his entire tenure. He was also absent from public view during the first three years of his formal reign, citing the traditional mourning period after his father’s death.

Kim Jong Un is a different kind of leader. He has explicitly modeled himself after his still-revered grandfather rather than his relatively unpopular father.²⁷ He has brought back the annual new year’s day address. He appears in public with his wife, Ri Sol Ju, something Kim Jong Il had avoided. Kim Jong Un has also resurrected the Korean Workers’ Party, restarting the long-defunct party congresses. Tapes smuggled out of North Korea in the 1980s showed Kim Jong Il privately expressing insecure views of his personal stature that are consistent with his psychological profile.²⁸ In contrast, Kim Jong Un exudes confidence and has shown himself ready to personally lead the current round of

23 Department of State, “Second-Phase Actions for the Implementation of the September 2005 Joint Statement,” Oct. 3, 2007, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2007/oct/93217.htm>.

24 Choe Sang-hun, “North Korea Limits Tests of Nuclear Site,” *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/13/world/asia/13korea.html>.

25 Kim Hakjoon, *Dynasty: The Hereditary Succession Politics of North Korea* (Stanford, CA: Walter Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2015), 101.

26 Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 43–44.

27 Andrei Lankov, “NK’s Founding Father, Kim Il-Sung,” *Korea Times*, Apr. 17, 2016, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2016/04/638_202760.html.

28 Barbara Demick, “Secret Tape Recordings of Kim Jong Il Provide Rare Insight into the Psyche of his North Korean Regime,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 27, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/asia/la-fg-kimtapes-snap-20161026-story.html>.

nuclear diplomacy through a series of summits with South Korea, China, and the United States.

It is natural and appropriate to look to the history of U.S.-North Korean and multilateral denuclearization efforts for insights into the upcoming talks. First, however, one must consider whether Kim Jong Un is following his father's playbook. On the critical issue of his ruling style, Kim Jong Un has parted ways with his father. It stands to reason, then,²⁹ that his priorities and methods concerning nuclear diplomacy may not be a carbon copy of his father's approach. Kim Jong Un proposed summit diplomacy with Trump, rather than having lower-level officials work toward a possible capstone summit by hashing out the details first. The younger Kim has taken the political risk upon himself and made it more difficult to blame subordinates for possible diplomatic failure. Leaders are always important in high-stakes diplomacy, but the summit approach makes their personality and predilections even more central to the outcome. The United States is only at the head of a long trail of diplomacy, and it is not at all clear that previous journeys foreshadow the current one.

On the American side, there is also a new sheriff in town. The United States negotiated the Agreed Framework and the joint statement of the six-party talks under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, respectively. Their administrations had different views on diplomacy with North Korea. Senior members of the Bush administration criticized the Agreed Framework negotiated under Clinton, which suffered a number of implementation challenges, including — but not limited to — the revelation of North Korea's nascent uranium enrichment program.³⁰ The differences between the two U.S. administrations were stark enough that some insiders dubbed the Bush administration's approach "ABC — Anything But Clinton."³¹ The

Bush administration, however, quickly shifted to its own diplomatic effort with the North Koreans after the final collapse of the Agreed Framework. This time around, there were more seats at the table, different areas of emphasis, and intra-government intrigue,³² but two things remained constant: the basic parameters of seeking a complete and permanent denuclearization of North Korea, and recognition that this would require some reciprocal and unpopular concessions. With a few notable exceptions, the two U.S. administrations operated — at the most general level — alike.

Donald Trump fashions himself a new kind of political leader. His engagement in tit-for-tat rhetorical barbs in 2017 — such as when he threatened to bring down "fire and fury"³³ on North Korea, or when he called Kim Jong Un "little rocket man"³⁴ — marked an outlier for American presidential behavior. Trump's public comments about military options — including limited military strikes that could not denuclearize North Korea by force but, it was hoped, would push Kim Jong Un back to the negotiating table — prompted substantial criticism about the wisdom of such an approach.³⁵ Trump quickly shifted gears in 2018, however, by accepting Kim Jong Un's summit invitation, conveyed through the South Korean president. He has sent Mike Pompeo to Pyongyang twice — first as director of the CIA and secretary of state-designate and then as secretary of state — to advance the summit and secure the release of three unjustly imprisoned Americans.³⁶ Trump's policy tools, including carrots, such as peace regime negotiations and sanctions relief, and sticks, including renewed sanctions and military moves, remain roughly the same as those available to his predecessors. But his willingness to meet Kim Jong Un early, to call off the summit, and to recommit to it within days demonstrates the greater element of uncertainty as to how the United States will begin

29 For a more in-depth discussion of differences in ruling style and approach between Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un, see Patrick McEachern, "Centralizing North Korean Policymaking Under Kim Jong Un," *Asian Perspective* (forthcoming).

30 Charles Kartman, Robert Carlin, and Joel Wit, "Policy in Context: A History of KEDO, 1994–2006" (Stanford, CA: Center for International Security Cooperation and Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies, June 2012), https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/A_History_of_KEDO-1.pdf.

31 James B. Steinberg, "The Bush Foreign Policy Revolution," Brookings Institution, June 1, 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-bush-foreign-policy-revolution/>.

32 Mike Chinoy, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

33 Noah Bierman, "Trump Warns North Korea of 'Fire and Fury,'" *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 8, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-trump-warns-north-korea-of-fire-and-1502220642-htmllstory.html>.

34 "Trump Calls Kim Jong Un 'Little Rocket Man' on Twitter," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 30, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/la-pol-updates-everything-president-trump-calls-kim-jong-un-little-rocket-1512093131-htmllstory.html>.

35 For the most comprehensive and succinct criticism of the idea of limited military strikes, see Abraham M. Denmark, "The Myth of the Limited Strike on North Korea," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 9, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2018-01-09/myth-limited-strike-north-korea>.

36 Carol Morello, Anna Fifield, and David Nakamura, "North Korea Frees 3 American Prisoners Ahead of a Planned Trump-Kim Summit," *Washington Post*, May 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/pompeo-north-korea-can-haverichly-deserved-opportunities-in-return-for-peace/2018/05/09/b51f6bfa-51a4-11e8-b00a-17f9fda3859b_story.html.

and sustain a diplomatic process with the North Koreans. The men entering the river are different.

Optimism: Allies, Peace Regime, and Learning

Achieving complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is a tall order. Getting it on the cheap or for free is taller still. If success is framed in these terms alone, there is little room for optimism. If, however, progress is defined as concretely minimizing the North Korean nuclear threat and moving toward an ultimate goal of denuclearization in such a way that the benefits to national interests outweigh the costs of concessions, then there is room to be optimistic. In short, optimists can argue that a successful agreement is one that leaves the United States and its allies better off than they are in the current situation and on the current trajectory. The U.S.-South Korean combined approach, serious consideration of creating a peace regime, and the real possibility of learning from past agreements together provide reason to be cautiously optimistic about the way forward in U.S.-North Korean diplomacy.

The U.S.-South Korean Combined Approach

North Korea gains tactical advantage when it can split the United States from its Northeast Asian allies, specifically South Korea. The United States, South Korea, and Japan have many more shared interests and values than differences, but North Korea knows where to find natural cleavages and has traditionally sought to exploit them. North Korea has long favored bilateral diplomacy with the United States in hopes of sidelining South Korea and Japan.

Tensions in the U.S.-South Korean alliance have also challenged previous efforts to maintain a united front against North Korea. Han Sung-joo, who served as South Korea's foreign minister during the Agreed Framework negotiations, noted that then-South Korean President Kim Young-sam wanted to ensure the Americans were not "too soft" on the North Koreans. At the same time, the South Korean president did not want to raise the risk of military conflict that threatened to destroy his capital. The conservative South Korean president,

worried about his domestic political support, also needed to assure his people that the United States was closely consulting him at every turn.³⁷ He wanted to make sure the American approach was neither too hot nor too cold at each stage of negotiations and sought to communicate this to South Koreans. The United States and South Korea were not in lockstep during the Agreed Framework, and Seoul worried about not having direct access to the North Koreans on a matter central to its national security.

Kim Young-sam's successor, Kim Dae-jung, came from the opposite end of the South Korean political spectrum and wholeheartedly endorsed engaging North Korea. Kim Dae-jung made history with the first inter-Korean summit in 2000 — just five months before the election of George W. Bush. Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" sought to change North Korean behavior through unconditional engagement, while Bush settled on a more confrontational approach to North Korea's objectionable actions. Alliance managers sought to keep the two sides linked, but it remained an ongoing challenge.³⁸

The long-term consequences of the unilateral use of force in Europe at a time of Russian weakness and insecurity would only be realized years later.

Differences among allies are inevitable, but the combined approach provides reasons for optimism that this time may be different. Never before has an inter-Korean summit, let alone two, been explicitly set up ahead of a U.S.-North Korea summit. The South Korean presidential office recognizes that it cannot push North Korean denuclearization alone and has sought to influence U.S. engagement with the North Koreans as well as its own. South Korean President Moon Jae-in has met early success with balancing his policy of engaging North Korea while keeping the United States firmly invested in the process. The road is long, and it will become

37 "Living History with Former ROK Foreign Minister Han Sung-joo," *Beyond Parallel*, Dec. 5, 2016, <https://beyondparallel.csis.org/living-history-han-sung-joo/>. Choe Sang-hun, "Korean Crisis Is Different This Time," *New York Times*, Aug. 3, 2009, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/04/world/asia/04iht-letter.html>.

38 Charles L. Pritchard, *Failed Diplomacy: The Tragic Story of How North Korea Got the Bomb* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2007).

even more difficult. The two sides will face tough choices and trade-offs as the North Koreans begin to articulate their core demands. Nevertheless, Washington and Seoul have gotten off to a solid start.

Peace Regime

In contrast to previous diplomatic rounds, North Korea's long-held demand to negotiate a peace treaty to replace the armistice and formally end the Korean War seems to be on the table. The Agreed Framework did not mention a peace regime or peace-treaty negotiations, but it opened the door to four-party talks —among the United States, North Korea, South Korea, and China — on these topics.³⁹ The Agreed Framework contained U.S. security guarantees to Pyongyang but lacked a specific and concrete quid pro quo on denuclearization and a peace regime. The 2005 joint statement promised to “negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula at an appropriate separate forum.”⁴⁰ The Russians convened the Northeast Asia Peace and Security Mechanism Working Group in Moscow three times. It was one of the five working groups of the six-party talks, but it did not produce concrete outcomes. The United States favored discussing a peace regime after North Korea denuclearized, and Pyongyang did not want to wait.⁴¹ The six-party talks, in practice, produced an agreement for denuclearization in exchange for sanctions relief and aid.

Demanding that North Korea denuclearize amounts to asking it to voluntarily relinquish the world's most powerful weapons. And reminders that its nuclear development violates international law do not move Pyongyang. Likewise, sanctions relief and aid can contribute to North Korea's economy but would not supplant the security that it believes nuclear weapons provide. Declassified documents from Pyongyang's socialist-bloc allies demonstrate that, in the 1970s, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung saw peace-treaty negotiations as a means to try to reduce and ultimately end the U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula. One of his senior party officials told a friendly foreign delegation in 1972,

The international public sees as just and honest our proposal to conclude a peace treaty between the two Koreas, to withdraw American forces and to reduce the militaries. If we conclude a peace treaty, the Americans would have no reason to stay there.⁴²

The intervening four decades have produced varying assessments of North Korea's intentions and objectives regarding peace regime negotiations. The United States will have to wait for Kim Jong Un's articulation of his specific demands to adjudicate between competing assessments. One thing, however, is fairly certain: North Korea will seek to supplant its perceived security losses from denuclearization with phased and reciprocal adjustments to the U.S. military presence on and around the Korean Peninsula.

How is this good news? Most analysts say that North Korean denuclearization is simply impossible.⁴³ Kim Jong Un does not want to go the way of Saddam Hussein or Muammar Gaddafi, who, lacking a nuclear deterrent, met their violent deaths after U.S.-led or -supported military operations. The peace regime issue brings to the fore difficult trade-offs and options for the highest-level decisions by elected U.S. leaders and American allies. After hearing the North Korean demands, seeking to negotiate them down, and considering the verifiable implementation measures, the United States and its allies will face a basic decision: Is the trade-off worth it at any stage?

Elected leaders may have to consider difficult adjustments to the U.S. military presence on the peninsula, such as the size and scope of military exercises, strategic asset deployment, and the nature of the permanent presence in exchange for verified, late-stage steps toward denuclearization. They may decide that whatever deal is on the table with North Korea is not worth the cost, but an acceptable deal might be laid out as well. Having North Korea's demands communicated directly from its leader to America's is superior to wading through the many contrasting assessments of what North Korea really wants.

39 James L. Schoff and Yaron Eisenberg, *Peace Regime Building on the Korean Peninsula: What's Next?* (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, May 2009), 3, <http://www.ifpa.org/pdf/PeaceRegimeInterimMay09.pdf>.

40 "Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks," <https://www.state.gov/p/eap/regional/c15455.htm>.

41 R. Michael Schiffer, "Envisioning a Northeast Asian Peace and Security Mechanism," in *Understanding New Political Realities in Seoul*, ed. L. Gordon Flake and Park Ro-byug (Washington: Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, 2008), 59–78.

42 P. Urjinhundev, "Protocols of the Talks between Mongolian and North Korean Government Delegations," Mar. 17, 1972.

43 For a sophisticated statement of this position and its implications for policy, see Sung Chull Kim and Michael D. Cohen, eds., *North Korea and Nuclear Weapons: Entering the New Era of Deterrence* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2017).



Learning

The Trump administration has the benefit of being able to learn from the past. Secretary of State Pompeo has noted repeatedly that he has read the CIA's history of negotiations with North Korea and vowed not to repeat past mistakes. Unlike the Agreed Framework negotiators, Pompeo has historical points of reference on negotiating with North Korea about its nuclear program. One lesson is the importance of blocking North Korea from pocketing concessions. If Pyongyang can reverse its concessions, the United States and its allies must be able to do the same. This simple lesson has not been followed in earlier negotiations.

In 2007, the six parties agreed to "Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement," which laid out in specific terms the first round of reciprocal steps to implement the 2005 agreement. North Korea pledged to disable its Yongbyon

reactor, allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to monitor the disablement, and issue a "list of all of its nuclear programs as described in the Joint Statement." The "parallel" action from the United States included removing North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism, lifting sanctions imposed through the Trading with the Enemy Act, and providing an initial tranche of heavy fuel oil as energy assistance.⁴⁴ North Korea's disablement procedures were temporary, reversible, and intended to elicit further implementation protocols that did indeed come.

When the six-party talks failed in 2008 over verification issues, North Korea was in a position to expel IAEA inspectors and move to restart the Yongbyon reactor immediately, though it delayed the restart for several years. After North Korea expelled the inspectors, the United States quickly reimposed by executive order the same authorities found in the Trading with the Enemy Act,⁴⁵ and

44 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "Initial Actions for the Implementation of the Joint Statement," Feb. 13, 2007, http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/n_korea/6party/action0702.html.

45 The White House, "Letter – Imposing Additional Sanctions with Respect to North Korea," Jan. 2, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/02/letter-imposing-additional-sanctions-respect-north-korea>.

North Korea lost out on deliveries of heavy fuel oil. The United States could not, however, reinstate North Korea on the terrorism list immediately. Once removed, relisting legally required North Korea to commit another terrorist act, and the United States did not reimpose this designation until 2017.⁴⁶ While some have argued that the United States could have relisted North Korea earlier under certain legal interpretations, the sort of “snapback” sanctions like those embedded in the Iran nuclear agreement did not exist to discourage North Korea from trying to pocket concessions in the first place. In the absence of an external

It is natural and appropriate to look to the history of U.S.-North Korean and multilateral denuclearization efforts for insights into the upcoming talks. First, however, one must consider whether Kim Jong Un is following his father’s playbook.

enforcement mechanism or a broader relationship that keeps other international agreements on track, carefully crafted quid pro quos that have equal degrees of reversibility and importance can help sustain lasting agreements by maintaining the same incentive structure for both sides to continue abiding by the terms.

Learning from history also requires a balanced understanding of past events. Since writing history is the practice of selecting which past events are significant enough to merit recording, there is always room for author bias. A one-sentence history of North Korea-related nuclear negotiations could simply note that no effort has achieved North Korea’s complete denuclearization. At this most

basic level, American and allied negotiators failed to meet their core objective. If one delves more deeply, however, the history quickly becomes more complex.

Both nuclear agreements delayed and degraded North Korea’s nuclear program — and a reciprocal price was paid for these concessions. The Agreed Framework verifiably froze for eight years North Korea’s plutonium program, which was its only fissile material production facility at the time of the negotiations. North Korea had three plutonium reactors under construction ahead of the Agreed Framework — one five megawatts, one 50 megawatts, and one 200 megawatts. The smallest of the three was the most developed, but the Agreed Framework effectively put the nail in the coffin of the other two.⁴⁷ Some point to a counterfactual to highlight the value of this nuclear agreement: “Experts estimate that without the Agreed Framework, North Korea could have hundreds of nuclear weapons at this point.”⁴⁸

But the Agreed Framework was a nuclear agreement, not a plutonium agreement, and North Korea cheated by initiating a uranium enrichment path to the bomb during the framework’s shaky years of implementation. The United States provided North Korea with more than \$400 million in energy assistance. South Korea and Japan contributed additional significant sums through the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO).⁴⁹ Concurrently, the United States and its international partners provided humanitarian assistance to North Korea during its late 1990s famine, which was never explicitly linked to the nuclear agreement. Critics charged that the aid propped up the regime amid its greatest existential crisis since the Korean War.⁵⁰

Likewise, the six-party talks verifiably shut down North Korea’s plutonium reactor for six years. It did not concretely address, however, the nascent but growing uranium enrichment threat. North Korea also received sanctions relief, some of which was not reversed until last year. Pyongyang was returned its unfrozen assets from a Macau bank

46 Michael D. Shear and David E. Sanger, “Trump Returns North Korea to List of State Sponsors of Terrorism,” *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/20/us/politics/north-korea-trump-terror.html>.

47 Federation of American Scientists, “Yongbyon,” March 4, 2000, <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/facility/yongbyon.htm>.

48 Davenport, “The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance.”

49 Mark E. Manyin and Mary Beth D. Nikitin, *Foreign Assistance to North Korea* (Washington: Congressional Research Service, April 2014), <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R40095.pdf>.

50 For a succinct and contemporary review of competing arguments for and against aid, among other considerations, see Robert A. Manning and James Przystup, “Starve North Korea — Or Save It? Right Now We’re Doing Both,” *Washington Post*, June 23, 1996, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1996/06/23/starve-north-korea-or-save-it-right-now-were-doing-both/97ea3f5d-511b-4286-b743-be7e6ef1efa9/>.



and, more significantly, changed its banking practices to limit America's ability to impose the same type of financial pain using the same tool.⁵¹

Proponents and opponents of engagement argue about what would have happened without these agreements. But counterfactuals are a dangerous analytical tool. It is impossible to know what would have happened if one historical variable had shifted. Would North Korea have more than 100 nuclear weapons today with three functioning plutonium reactors had there been no Agreed Framework? Or would the regime have collapsed under its own weight without the Western aid? It is impossible to say. Everyone has preconceived ideas and biases, but critical readers of this history who seek to genuinely learn from the past should be equally wary of counterfactuals that support or oppose preconceived ideas.

Conclusion

History is messy. Neither proponents nor opponents of the Trump-Kim summit should feel confident that history is on their side. History reveals reasons for pessimism, optimism, and caution. Attempting to critically engage the history of these nuclear negotiations can help the United States narrow uncertainty, prepare for a long diplomatic process should one transpire, and perhaps learn some tactical lessons. Given the paucity of concrete data on Kim Jong Un and his decision-making, humility in analysis is warranted. Confident statements about what the North Korean leader seeks before he tells us are misplaced. North Korea's nuclear program has advanced significantly since the last nuclear deals, but the two sides seem to be getting closer to a formula for a possible deal. Any deal — if one is indeed possible — is likely to involve difficult trade-offs for both sides. Experts can help illuminate public debate on the merits of these trade-offs, but elected leaders will ultimately need wisdom for the hard decisions ahead. 🇺🇸

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51 John Park and Jim Walsh, *Stopping North Korea, Inc.: Sanctions Effectiveness and Unintended Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Security Studies Program, August 2016), 16, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/Stopping%20North%20Korea%20Inc%20Park%20and%20Walsh%20.pdf>.