US relations with both North and South Korea have been characterized by profound asymmetries of power and perception which in recent years have led to increased tensions among the three countries. An uneasy truce concerning North Korea’s nuclear ambitions ended in 2002, bringing the USA closer to a war footing. In South Korea, meanwhile, anger and resentment over an unequal partnership, combined with an ongoing US re-evaluation of its security role on the peninsula, have put an enormous strain on a longstanding alliance.

*The Future of US-Korean Relations* brings together twelve prominent experts on US-Korean and US-Pacific relations to explore the many dimensions of current and future US foreign policy. Charting new developments in North and South Korea, the contributors examine US-Korean relations through such prisms as nationalism, the media, regional relations and human rights issues. In relating the downward spiral in US relations with the Korean peninsula, the contributors provide an analysis that runs counter to conventional interpretations, and offers clear and balanced policy recommendations for remedying the crises.

*The Future of US-Korean Relations* is deeply incisive and broadly relevant as an ideal resource for students, teachers and policy professionals interested in security studies, East Asian politics and US foreign policy.

**John Feffer** has been a Pantech Fellow in Korean Studies at Stanford University and is currently a Writing Fellow at the Provisions Library in Washington, DC. He is the author of *North Korea, South Korea: U.S. Policy at a Time of Crisis* (Seven Stories, 2003). He is also the editor of *Power Trip: U.S. Unilateralism and Global Policy after September 11* (Seven Stories, 2003).
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*Vaclav Smil*

**The Chinese State in Ming Society**
*Timothy Brook*
The Future of US-Korean Relations
The imbalance of power

Edited by John Feffer
For Melvin Feffer, father and scholar
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We are scholars working in the United States and other countries who join together out of concern about current US policies toward the Korean peninsula.

We believe that current problems on the Korean peninsula and between the United States and the two Koreas, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Republic of Korea, can only be solved through dialogue, cooperation, and the active pursuit of peace. We feel the responsibility to speak out against policies that increase tensions in Northeast Asia and may lead to another catastrophic war in Korea. We wish to add our voices to a constructive discussion on how to achieve a peaceful, unified Korea existing in harmony with its neighbors, including the United States.

The Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea (ASCK) is dedicated to the promotion of mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of Korea, both North and South. The goals and activities of ASCK include:

1. Helping scholars, students, policy-makers and the general public learn about Korea, both North (DPRK) and South (ROK), through accurate, historically informed analyses.
3. Facilitating the exchange of scholars and students between the United States and the DPRK.

We realize that this is a critical moment in US-Korean relations. Our organization is committed to promoting a US policy toward Korea that is informed, humane, and in everyone's mutual interest.

For more information on ASCK, visit the organization’s website at www.asck.org
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>ACDA</td>
<td>Arms Control and Disarmament Agency</td>
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<td>ADE</td>
<td>armored division equivalent</td>
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<td>ARF</td>
<td>ASEAN Regional Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASCK</td>
<td>Association of Scholars Concerned about Korea</td>
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<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of South-east Asian Nations</td>
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<td>ASEM</td>
<td>Asia-Europe Meeting</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCP</td>
<td>Chinese Communist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEDAW</td>
<td>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women</td>
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<td>CEP</td>
<td>circular error probability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSCE</td>
<td>Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSTPEPO</td>
<td>Convention on the Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>CVID</td>
<td>complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement</td>
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<tr>
<td>DMZ</td>
<td>demilitarized zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPRK</td>
<td>Democratic People’s Republic of Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>FY</td>
<td>financial year</td>
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<tr>
<td>GAO</td>
<td>US General Accounting Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>GAO</td>
<td>Government Accountability Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>gross domestic product</td>
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<td>GNP</td>
<td>Grand National Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEU</td>
<td>highly enriched uranium</td>
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<td>HRNK</td>
<td>US Committee for North Korean Human Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAEA</td>
<td>International Atomic Energy Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICBM</td>
<td>intercontinental ballistic missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>IISS</td>
<td>International Institute for Strategic Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSP</td>
<td>Japan Socialist Party</td>
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<tr>
<td>KCNA</td>
<td>Korean Central News Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>KEDO</td>
<td>Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>KHIS</td>
<td>Korean House for International Solidarity</td>
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<tr>
<td>LDP</td>
<td>Liberal Democratic Party (Japan)</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGNKC</td>
<td>Leading Group on the North Korean Crisis</td>
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**List of abbreviations**

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>LPP</td>
<td>Land Partnership Program</td>
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<td>MAD</td>
<td>mutual assured destruction</td>
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<tr>
<td>MSD</td>
<td>Minsaengdan (People’s Livelihood Corps)</td>
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<tr>
<td>NFKC</td>
<td>North Korea Freedom Coalition</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>nongovernmental organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>NKAG</td>
<td>North Korea Advisory Group</td>
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<tr>
<td>NKHRA</td>
<td>North Korean Human Rights Act</td>
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<td>NPR</td>
<td>Nuclear Posture Review</td>
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<td>NPT</td>
<td>Non-Proliferation Treaty</td>
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<td>NSC</td>
<td>National Security Council</td>
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<td>NSS</td>
<td>National Security Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>OSCE</td>
<td>Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>public law</td>
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<tr>
<td>POW/MIA</td>
<td>prisoner of war/missing in action</td>
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<td>PRM</td>
<td>Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration</td>
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<td>PSI</td>
<td>Proliferation Security Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>QDR</td>
<td>Quadrennial Defense Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>RENK</td>
<td>Rescue North Korean People</td>
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<td>ROK</td>
<td>Republic of Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>SCO</td>
<td>Shanghai Cooperation Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>SDF</td>
<td>Self-Defense Forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEZ</td>
<td>Special Economic Zone</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIPRI</td>
<td>Stockholm International Peace Research Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOFA</td>
<td>Status of Forces Agreement</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAC</td>
<td>Treaty of Amity and Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TCOG</td>
<td>Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TMD</td>
<td>theater missile defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commission for Refugees</td>
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<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
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<tr>
<td>USFK</td>
<td>US Forces Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td>WFP</td>
<td>World Food Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>WMD</td>
<td>weapons of mass destruction</td>
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<td>WTO</td>
<td>World Trade Organization</td>
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Introduction

John Feffer

Profound asymmetries of power and perception haunt US relations with both North and South Korea. Over the past half decade, these power imbalances have worsened, leading to increased tensions among the three countries. An uneasy, eight-year truce over North Korea’s nuclear ambitions ended in 2002, and the United States moved closer to a war footing. In South Korea, meanwhile, anger and resentment over an unequal partnership, combined with an ongoing US reevaluation of its security role on the peninsula, have put an enormous strain on a longstanding alliance.

The reelection of George W. Bush in 2004 ensured a measure of continuity in US policy toward the Korean peninsula. In its second term, the administration continued to play hardball with the North, though with somewhat softer rhetoric. Toward the South, meanwhile, the United States viewed the engagement approach of President Roh Mooh Hyun with skepticism and found even less to like in Seoul’s intention to play a balancing role in the region. With the conflict dragging on in Iraq and 20,000 US troops still trying to keep order in Afghanistan, the US government has likely put any contingency plans for war with North Korea on the back burner. But even if the Bush administration has no plan to precipitate conflict in East Asia, its policies toward Korea may well lead to unintended consequences. Miscalculations could impel both the United States and North Korea toward a war that both sides acknowledge would have catastrophic effects but that, because of the logic of military escalation, neither side may be able to avert.

War, however, is never inevitable. This collection of essays, an initiative of the Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea, explores the downward spiral in US relations with the Korean peninsula, provides analysis that runs counter to conventional interpretations, and offers clear and balanced policy recommendations for remedying the crises.

Korea and the world

In 2000, the United States and North Korea seemed on the verge of détente. After North Korean Vice-Marshals Jo Myong Rok visited Washington to
sign a joint communiqué with President Bill Clinton in October, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made a reciprocal visit to Pyongyang. Clinton planned to follow up with the first ever visit of a sitting US president to North Korea to conclude a deal on the country’s missile program. In Clinton’s final days in office, the United States was weighing a plan to provide compensation in kind if North Korea ended missile exports. Moreover, if Pyongyang froze the production of missiles of greater than 500 km in range, the United States was willing to launch satellites for the country for free.¹

The election of George W. Bush, however, spelled the end of US attempts to engage North Korea. The administration failed to follow up on the potential missile deal and missed other opportunities to conduct negotiations with North Korea. After September 11, 2001, these positions hardened. The administration declared North Korea part of the “axis of evil,” identified it as a potential target of a first strike of nuclear weapons in the Nuclear Posture Review, and confronted Pyongyang over a secret uranium enrichment program in October 2002. In short, the administration traded in the Clinton policy of “carrots and sticks” for an “all stick, all the time” approach. South Korea’s alternative approach of encouraging economic interaction with the North generated little enthusiasm among top US officials.

These shifts in US policy toward the two Koreas have taken place against the backdrop of a radically reconfigured American foreign policy. Particularly after September 11, the Bush administration has broken with a “balance of power” tradition to put greater emphasis on military force and unilateral pressure. In the 1990s, despite a commitment to sustaining the “unipolar moment” created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington still accepted the global security architecture of the post-World War II era. Madeleine Albright declared the United States an “indispensable nation,” but the Clinton administration still managed to maintain close relations with key allies in Europe and Asia, attempted to shape rather than shred multilateral institutions and treaties, and relied more on the “soft power” of economic and political influence than the “hard power” of the military. In contrast, the Bush administration has sought to remake the global order in a way that upsets the balance of power in strategic areas of the world in favor of a strengthened and extended US military dominance. This unilateralism translated into not signing international statutes (on the International Criminal Court), rejecting international accords (the Kyoto Protocol on global warming), and scrapping treaties (the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty).

Dramatic changes have also taken place in East Asia. Several factors have disrupted the traditional alignment of the post-World War II period. North Korea’s Taepodong rocket test of 1998 and disclosures of the kidnapping of Japanese citizens further frayed relations between these two historic adversaries and accelerated Japanese efforts to replace its Self-Defense Forces with a more offensively arrayed military. China has carved out a more assertive
diplomatic role in the region, symbolized most vividly by its mediating role in the current Korean nuclear crisis. And despite increased tensions between Washington and Pyongyang, there has been considerable movement forward in inter-Korean rapprochement. The jointly sponsored industrial zone at Kaesong, a city just north of the demilitarized zone, is testament to the faith that both countries have in a slow, bottom-up reunification process that can proceed incrementally even as substantial disagreements persist over security questions.

Taken together, the traditional roles of all five major actors in the region have shifted. The United States has become more unilaterally disposed, Japan more militarily assertive, China more adroitly diplomatic, and the two Koreas more explicitly cooperative.

While the policies of the United States and the key actors in the region have shifted, one thing has remained the same. Multilateral agreements and institutions that might otherwise even out regional disparities in political and economic power, as integration has done to a certain extent in Europe, remain very weak in East Asia. North Korea remains a diplomatic black hole, recognized by most European countries but still treated as an outlier by Washington, Tokyo, and, to a lesser extent, Seoul. North Korea’s ambiguous status serves as a significant obstacle to the creation of a multilateral security framework for the region. Nor does East Asia have a regional free-trade agreement under consideration (though countries in the region are exploring bilateral agreements). Cold War divisions have been blurred in recent years with China’s accession to the World Trade Organization and its vigorous efforts to resolve the current nuclear crisis. The maladroit diplomacy of the Bush administration has helped East Asian countries grope toward some common positions. But the region is still marked by high levels of military preparedness and mutual distrust.

These divisions, unmitigated by multilateral structures, have long served as the rationale for the projection of US power in the region. The US army has traditionally attempted to preserve the balance of power in East Asia by constraining its allies and containing its adversaries. To maintain security, the United States asserts preponderant power. Although the US government claims neutrality, it is in fact the asymmetric capabilities of the Pentagon – including massive nuclear and naval superiority – that empower the United States as a broker in the region.

In the past five years, in East Asia as in the world at large, the United States has moved from preserving such asymmetries of power to exploiting them. This trend is part of the larger move from containment to rollback. The Clinton administration exerted influence to contain the Taliban and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq; the Bush administration used massive military force to remove these regimes. In East Asia, the Bush administration flirted with this same transformation by downgrading China from “strategic partner” to “strategic adversary” and elevating “regime change” in North Korea as a priority, despite some resistance from the State Department. That the
United States has not acted in East Asia as it did in Central Asia and the Middle East – considerably moderating its stance toward China and backing off from overt regime change strategies toward North Korea – speaks to the limits of US military power, and military force more generally in the wake of the Iraq War, than any moderation of philosophy among top administration officials.

Regional asymmetries

The contributors in this volume explain in detail the range of asymmetries that lie at the heart of the current conflicts between the United States and the two Koreas. In the military sphere, for instance, the United States can boast of an enormous military superiority over North Korea in terms of nuclear capability as well as conventional forces. North Korea’s perception of this imbalance in part propelled its decision to pursue its own nuclear deterrent while at the same time attempting to negotiate a security guarantee from the United States. As Jae-Jung Suh argues in Chapter 4, though, even the South Korean military – independent from US forces – is superior in quality to North Korea, making this military asymmetry all the more profound.

The current negotiations between the United States and North Korea over the latter’s nuclear program, Charles Armstrong maintains in Chapter 1, also reflect the general power imbalance between the two countries. The Bush administration has been largely inflexible in its stance, confident that this imbalance will resolve itself eventually with a dramatic change in North Korea’s negotiating position or in the collapse of the regime itself. In Chapter 7, Karin Lee and Adam Miles note that Congress has encouraged this inflexibility, first by challenging the terms of the 1994 Agreed Framework and then by attempting to push other issues onto the negotiating table that are likely to make a security agreement less likely.

The imbalance of power applies not only to the northern half of the peninsula. The United States maintains a role in South Korea’s military operations unparalleled elsewhere in the world. Perceptions of this power imbalance as well as real changes in the internal balance of power in South Korean society, as Katharine Moon points out in Chapter 2, have led a range of civic organizations – and now the South Korean government itself – to demand greater equality in alliance relations. The United States treats South Korea as a second-rate partner, despite its first-rate economy and growing military power.

Considered by the CIA to be roughly equal in economic strength in 1975, North and South Korea have moved further and further apart in recent years. South Korea has become one of the top dozen economies in the world, while North Korea has fallen to the level of Haiti. This economic imbalance is accentuated by a political asymmetry. While North Korea remains a dictatorship, South Korea has not only become democratic but has a civil society unmatched in the world for its vibrancy. Moreover, there is a
subtle but growing divide on the issue of nationalism. While both countries still adhere to an understanding of Korean-ness as a matter of bloodlines, the first signs of a new civic nationalism have appeared in the South that establishes membership in the democratic political life of the country as formative of Korean identity. Gi-Wook Shin and Paul Chang, in Chapter 3, write that the United States has misread the development of nationalism on the Korean peninsula, conflating nationalism with communism in the North and with anti-Americanism in the South and failing to acknowledge the importance of Korean national pride in developing US policy toward the peninsula.

For the region as a whole, the Cold War balance of power is breaking down as Japan pursues a “normal” military and China, with a confidence bred of a booming economy, advances a more assertive diplomacy. The uncompromising Japanese response on the abductee issue, as Gavan McCormack and Wada Haruki maintain in Chapter 5, has made normalization of relations with North Korea increasingly remote, despite the personal pledge of Prime Minister Koizumi to accomplish this task during his tenure in office. Japan, in other words, is moving toward “Cold War plus” in siding with the United States and its asymmetrical power advantage. China, on the other hand, appears to be moving toward “Cold War minus.” As Samuel Kim argues in Chapter 6, China’s evolving foreign policy doctrine, increasingly cooperative in nature, points to a potentially stronger role for multilateralism in the region. Finally, as I argue in Chapter 9 on the prospects for regional security in North-east Asia, the outcome of this battle between two visions of regional integration will depend a great deal on how the US responds to China’s initiatives, defuses the current conflict with North Korea, and handles the concerns and ambitions of its regional allies.

The way ahead

Personalities, in part, drive US politics. The personal animosity that George W. Bush has expressed toward Kim Jong Il, similar to his feelings toward Saddam Hussein, may well make rapprochement very difficult. The departure of Colin Powell from the State Department, along with relative moderates like Richard Armitage, throws into question the balance of power within the administration between hard-liners and proponents of engagement. Condoleeza Rice, the new Secretary of State, for several years argued against a “cookie cutter” policy toward Iraq and North Korea, and promoted negotiations with the latter. But she is also well known for her hard-line approach on security matters. Vice President Dick Cheney remains a major proponent of the hawk position, much as he did in the late 1980s when he was Secretary of Defense in the George H.W. Bush administration and dismissed the reforms that Gorbachev launched in the Soviet Union. The Special Envoy for Human Rights in North Korea, Jay Lefkowitz, has impeccable neo-conservative credentials and a record of pushing hard on the
issue of Soviet Jewry, but brings no particular experience on Korea to the job. The engagement camp, meanwhile, can apparently count on Christopher Hill, the head of the US negotiating team in the Six-Party Talks.

If the first Bush term could be characterized as a struggle between the hawks and engagers, a more complex picture has emerged in the second term. The State Department, with Hill as energetic point man, has promoted diplomatic solutions as befits a body of career diplomats. In the lead-up to and during the fourth round of Six-Party Talks in July 2005, US negotiators broke the prohibition on face-to-face meetings with North Korean officials and spent countless hours trying to hammer out an accord. While the US negotiating position remained rather firm – with no perceptible movement on either the sequence of dismantlement, the bundling of issues, or the acceptance of a civil nuclear program – US diplomats began to build up a certain amount of credibility through negotiating.

While negotiations capture the headlines, the skeptics lie in wait. The US government has placed new restrictions on humanitarian aid, still blocks North Korea from access to international financial institutions, and deploys a containment approach in the non-proliferation realm that denies the country any technology that might have a dual use for the military, however far-fetched. There was hope during the first administration that the North Korean regime would collapse. Patience, combined with a ratcheted-up version of containment to accomplish regime change, has its advocates in the second administration.

But this laissez-faire approach to regime change does not sit well with everybody. In Congress, the sponsors of the Advance Democracy Act expect to transform forty-five autocracies by 2025, North Korea among them, through non-military means. The bill, which would make regime change into an organizing principle of US foreign policy, passed the House in July 2005 and awaits a vote in the Senate. Meanwhile, attempts to link North Korea to al Qaeda – through the reputed sale of some guns to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the Philippines – suggest a shoehorning of anti-DPRK activities into the overall “war on terrorism.” Shortly after the 2004 elections, the Central Intelligence Agency’s Porter Goss reportedly urged his chief of spy operations to use undercover operatives in North Korea. Seymour Hersh has argued in The New Yorker that the Pentagon will direct its new covert operations, known as “black reconnaissance,” first and foremost at Iran, but the administration’s record from the first term demonstrates that its more hawkish members are not afraid to multitask.

These three approaches – diplomacy, containment plus, and active destabilization – are all present in US policy toward North Korea, though in different degrees at different times. Their proponents jockey for position within the administration and Congress and await changes on the ground to bolster their arguments. At the same time, events in other parts of the world, particularly Iran and Iraq, influence both the pace and nature of US-North Korean relations as the Bush administration struggles to answer charges that
its foreign policy is inconsistent and strives to achieve some measure of diplomatic success when US efforts elsewhere are stalled.

In the Bush administration's first term, regime change was the logical policy approach toward a country deemed to be "evil." But this hard-line position has encountered increasing external and domestic resistance. First of all, the consequences of regime collapse in Pyongyang are unpredictable. There are no North Korean Vaclav Havels waiting to take over and usher in civil society. There is no shadow government percolating among defectors in other countries. China, in particular, fears a political vacuum in Pyongyang and the potential for a major outpouring of refugees. South Korea, meanwhile, does not have an express unification plan or the desire to spend the hundreds of billions of dollars necessary to handle a crisis-wracked area. Of perhaps greater concern to the Pentagon, regime collapse could mean that whatever nuclear material exists in North Korea would suddenly be up for grabs. Overextended in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US military is also acutely aware of both the challenges and the horrific consequences of war in the region.

This informal consensus on the potential hazards of the hard-line "regime change" approach – shared by China, South Korea, and top career military officials in the Pentagon – no doubt contributed to the greater flexibility in the US negotiating position in the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks in summer 2005. Other political actors in the United States are encouraging the trend. For instance, although Congress is more firmly in Republican hands after the 2004 elections, there are many Republican voices in support of engagement with North Korea. The most intriguing of these voices has been Curt Weldon (R-PA), an otherwise hawkish member of the House Armed Services Committee. Perhaps in emulation of Jimmy Carter's actions to avert war during the first nuclear crisis in 1993–94, Weldon has traveled to North Korea in an effort to find some formula for an agreement. If he and others can forge a bipartisan consensus around engagement, then the administration will feel continued pressure to show flexibility at the negotiating table. The American public, weary of wars and perpetual crises, could also prove influential should North Korea become a more prominent public policy issue.

The United States faces an important crossroads in dealing with the Korean peninsula and, by extension, East Asia. Along one path lies increased conflict – diplomatic, economic, and even military. Along another path lies heightened cooperation and mutual benefit that arise from a greater equality in relations. The contributors to this volume seek to illuminate this latter path.
Notes

1 See, for example, Gary Samore, “US-DPRK Missile Negotiations,” The Non-Proliferation Review, Summer 2002.


1 US-North Korean Relations

Charles K. Armstrong

According to the images popularized by the US media and government, North Korea is little more than a horrifying totalitarian regime. Guilty of grievous crimes against its citizens, it is also portrayed as a belligerent rogue state bent on developing nuclear weapons to threaten its neighbors and even the United States. The Cold War may have ended well over a decade ago, but the common view of North Korea in the United States is a striking relic of that earlier conflict, combined recently with a somewhat incongruous image of North Korea as an enemy in the “war on terror.” These characterizations have driven much of US policy toward the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK).

Certainly, there is some truth to these negative American perceptions of the DPRK. The lengthy report on North Korea’s prison camp system published by the US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, for example, outlines egregious violations of human rights in extensive and disturbing detail.1 And, indeed, the potential for devastating conflict and instability on the Korean peninsula and in North-east Asia is ever-present, a situation that would be all the more dangerous with the proliferation of nuclear weapons on the peninsula.

But to see North Korea itself as the sole source of danger, with the implication that only a “regime change” in North Korea would ultimately resolve the problems in the region, ignores the historical context of the Korean problem, which dates back to the half century of Japanese colonialism that ended in 1945 and the Korean War that followed five years later. It also ignores recent changes on the Korean peninsula and within North Korea, as well as in American foreign policy. Just as critically, the exclusively negative portrayal of North Korea has been counter-productive. For instance, the tendency of the Bush administration to take a hawkish line toward North Korea in such areas as nuclear development and human rights has not improved the situation but rather has exacerbated the problems. A policy of engagement, both in bilateral US-DPRK relations and within a multilateral regional framework, will more likely resolve the current nuclear standoff and address the long-term security and humanitarian problems of the Korean peninsula and the North-east Asian region. The resolution of these
problems should follow from rather than precede the normalization of US-DPRK relations.

Another defect of current US policy toward the Korean Peninsula is its failure to recognize the new dynamic between North and South Korea, which have for the past couple of years been moving away from the unremitting confrontation of the Cold War. Since the late 1990s, South Korea has been taking the lead in a policy of engagement with the North. The Bush administration's more hard-line policy toward North Korea, contradicting the active promotion of reconciliation by South Korean President Roh Moo Hyun, has provoked considerable anxiety in the South. Take, for instance, the North Korean Human Rights Act, passed by Congress on 28 September 2004 and signed by the president the following month. The Act directly attacks the DPRK as a "dictatorship under the absolute rule of Kim Jong Il" and calls for the promotion of the free flow of information, political freedom, and the market economy in the DPRK. North Korea predictably slammed the bill, but it was the reaction in the South that was perhaps more surprising. South Korean nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), some of the progressive media, and parliamentary members of the ruling Uri Party all criticized the bill for increasing friction between North Korea and the United States, and thus exacerbating the very problems it was intended to resolve – human rights violations in North Korea and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on the Korean peninsula.

If the North Korea of the American imagination is a vaguely sinister place, North Koreans view the United States as a clear and present danger to their state's very existence. The North Korean government has regularly evoked the memory of the awesome destruction wreaked by US bombing during the Korean War to reinforce the image of America as a ruthless and implacable enemy. Statements by the Bush administration singling out North Korea as a potential target for nuclear attack, as in the Nuclear Posture Review of 2001, have heightened the climate of fear and tension. Despite this record of hostility, the DPRK has made efforts since the early 1990s to improve relations with the United States for the economic and political benefits normalization could bring as well as to safeguard its own security against the perceived threat of the world's only superpower.

In the decade and a half since the end of the Cold War, the United States and DPRK have experienced two major crises over the latter's alleged production of nuclear weapons. The first crisis nearly led to war in 1994, followed by an agreement that (apparently) ended North Korea's nuclear program and opened up a path to peace and normal relations between the two countries. Any movement down that path came to an abrupt halt in 2002–2003, when the second nuclear crisis emerged over US accusations of another, secret North Korean nuclear program and renewed US threats of action against the DPRK.

But the crisis that emerged in October 2002 over the DPRK's nuclear program was only the latest round in the long confrontation between the
United States and North Korea, ongoing since the Korean War broke out in June 1950. This crisis is best seen as a symptom of the more fundamental problem of division and confrontation in and around the Korean peninsula. However difficult and problematic it may be, the best means for resolving the current crisis is for both the United States and DPRK to move from confrontation to engagement to an active process of reconciliation. US-DPRK reconciliation within a broader multilateral framework would lay the basis for a North-east Asian security regime that could substantially reduce the potential for conflict. The Six-Party Talks that began in 2003 – involving North and South Korea, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States – could serve as the framework for such a security regime. It is certainly better than the alternatives: military conflict over Korea or a nuclear arms race in East Asia. At the heart of any progress toward peace in the region must be an end to the state of war on the Korean peninsula and a resolution to the US-DPRK conflict that addresses the legitimate security concerns of both parties.

Crises and opportunities

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, American security concerns shifted focus from global superpower confrontation to local conflicts and so-called rogue states. In regional terms, this meant, above all, the Middle East and North-east Asia, and more specifically, Iraq and North Korea. In the 1990s, North Korea became central to US security policy and the focus of media attention as never before, at least not since the Korean War. North Korea was in a sense ideally suited to be the enemy du jour. On the one hand, it seemed a holdover from the Cold War, a peculiar outpost of Stalinist evil; on the other, it fit the profile of the small, autocratic renegade regime led by an idiosyncratic if not insane dictator. That, at least, was the US media image of the DPRK. Perhaps only Slobodan Milošević's Yugoslavia, albeit in a rather different way, so neatly brought together for the American public new and old ideas of evil states. In any case, according to the conventional wisdom of the early 1990s, North Korea would soon collapse, following East Germany and its erstwhile patron the Soviet Union into the dustbin of history. The collapse did not in fact happen, and US-DPRK relations lurched through a series of crises: North Korea’s alleged production of nuclear weapons, which brought the two countries to the brink of war in June 1994; a famine in North Korea that peaked around 1996–98; North Korea’s missile program in the late 1990s; and a second nuclear confrontation emerging in the fall of 2002.

These crises, while potentially rife with unpredictable and disastrous consequences, also created opportunities for the United States and North Korea to engage in substantial dialogue with each other for the first time in over a half-century of acrimonious confrontation. Not until the 1990s did the United States have a positive policy toward North Korea, as opposed to
a negatively stated position of isolating the country and defending South Korea against the North. At the same time, after the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the DPRK appeared to realize that its best chances for survival and security lay, ironically, in improving relations with the United States – in order to remove both the American security threat as well as barriers to foreign economic aid and investment.

But the emergence of cautious engagement between the United States and North Korea was a fitful process. Each step toward more normal relations was accompanied by, and developed out of, crisis. The first nuclear crisis led to the Agreed Framework of October 1994, the famine of the mid-1990s led to unprecedented amounts of US private and government aid flowing to North Korea, the missile crisis of the late 1990s reinvigorated engagement, and the second nuclear crisis resulted in the creation of a new multilateral forum – the Six Party Talks – for discussing peace on and around the Korean peninsula. The problem with a crisis-driven relationship is its unpredictability: a crisis can easily lead to catastrophe rather than dialogue. So far, the worst-case scenarios have not occurred, but it is far from certain that the current dialogue process will lead to a satisfactory solution for all concerned. Meanwhile, in the absence of a peace agreement or normal relations between the United States and the DPRK, any number of nightmares could still become reality, including all-out war on the Korean peninsula or a nuclear arms race in East Asia with all the dangers of proliferation that would entail. In short, a crisis-driven policy is not sustainable, and only a real breakthrough in US-DPRK relations will end this dangerous cycle of confrontation, crisis, and reluctant engagement.

The first nuclear crisis between the United States and North Korea erupted in the early 1990s, when photographs from spy satellites, as interpreted by US intelligence and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), suggested that the North Koreans were extracting spent plutonium from its nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, about 100 kilometers north of Pyongyang. The most logical use of the plutonium was for the development of nuclear weapons, and by 1993 the CIA had concluded that a North Korean nuclear weapons program was well underway and that the DPRK had already extracted enough plutonium for one or two weapons. The resulting confrontation over international inspections of the Yongbyon facilities between North Korea, on the one hand, and the IAEA and the United States, on the other, rapidly escalated between the spring of 1993 and the summer of 1994. The crisis came to a head in June 1994, with the United States threatening to call for sanctions against North Korea through the UN Security Council, the North Koreans denouncing such threats as “an act of war,” and the Clinton administration weighing the option of an air strike on the Yongbyon facility, possibly leading to a second Korean War.

With the United States and North Korea on the brink of war, Jimmy Carter took up a long-standing invitation from North Korean leader Kim Il Sung to visit Pyongyang. Here the former US President received Kim’s
“personal pledge to freeze North Korea’s nuclear program” in exchange for American help with North Korea’s energy program and a reduction of tensions between the two countries. The Clinton administration took up Kim’s offer, and after months of bilateral negotiations, the United States and DPRK signed the Agreed Framework in October 1994. In essence, the Agreed Framework exchanged North Korea’s nuclear freeze for a US promise (with the primary financial and technical backing of South Korea and Japan) to build a pair of light-water reactors on the east coast of North Korea, with a target completion date of 2003. In the meantime, the United States agreed to supply North Korea with fuel oil to compensate for the loss of energy from the frozen Yongbyon reactor. The United States, South Korea, and Japan administered this program through a consortium based in New York, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO). Later the European Union joined the executive board of KEDO, and other countries also contributed to the energy project.

In reality, the Agreed Framework was more than just a deal to supply North Korea with energy. Its ultimate purpose was political: to prevent the development of nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula and open up a channel for dialogue between the United States and the DRPK, leading in due course to the normalization of economic and political relations. However, a decade later, despite some progress on both the energy and diplomatic fronts, the light-water reactors still had not been built, and a second nuclear crisis effectively put an end to the Agreed Framework. Each side blamed the other for the failure of the agreement, and both had some justification. As the North Koreans saw it, the United States did not keep its promise to build the reactors in time and did not move with due rapidity toward normalization. The United States, under both Clinton and under Bush, suspected North Korea of not abiding by the terms of the nuclear freeze and of maintaining a clandestine weapons program.

This crisis should be seen in the broader context of North Korea’s decades-long confrontation with a nuclear-armed United States, as well as the DPRK’s pursuit of nuclear energy. The Armistice that ended the fighting in Korea in July 1953 was not a peace treaty, and the two countries remain to this day in a state of war. It is, moreover, a highly asymmetric conflict: North Korea is much more vulnerable to US hostility than the other way around, including devastation by American nuclear weapons. Since the Korean War, North Korea has faced the possibility, and at various times direct threat, of a nuclear attack by the United States. Within a few years of the war’s end, the United States introduced nuclear artillery and mines into Korea, which it finally withdrew in 1991. Even after that, the United States has made it clear that it would consider using nuclear weapons to deter North Korea, including a possible pre-emptive strike. Under these circumstances, it should not be surprising that North Korea would seek a nuclear deterrent against the United States, particularly with the loss of its main superpower patron and the collapse of its Eastern bloc trade partners after the end of the Cold War.
North Korea’s stated intention to pursue nuclear energy for peaceful purposes also should not be dismissed. With Soviet aid and advice, the DPRK established its first nuclear research center and reactor at Yongbyon in the 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, North Korea embarked on an ambitious program of nuclear energy development, helped by both Soviet technical assistance as well as substantial indigenous deposits of natural uranium. That Japan and South Korea were similarly developing nuclear energy on a large scale no doubt spurred North Korea’s efforts. South Korea was also trying to develop nuclear weapons, until it was stopped by the United States in the early 1970s, and this may also have contributed to North Korea’s desire to develop its own nuclear deterrent.

In December 1985, the same year that North Korea signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the USSR agreed to help the DPRK construct a nuclear power plant near Sinp’o on the east coast of North Korea – the very place where KEDO would later propose building the two light-water nuclear reactors as part of the Agreed Framework. North Korea’s failure to pay for construction led to Russia halting work on the Sinp’o project in 1992, leaving the DPRK $1.7 million dollars in debt to the Soviet Union’s Ministry of Atomic Energy. When the Agreed Framework broke down in 2003, with little more than holes in the ground where the reactors were to be built, the North Koreans could claim with some justification that they had been cheated out of nuclear power plants twice, first by the Russians and then by the Americans.

The 1994 Agreed Framework marked a major breakthrough in US-DPRK relations. For the first time there was an institutional mechanism for US-North Korean dialogue and cooperation, however limited, and the two sides seemed ready to move toward a relaxation of tensions, economic exchange, and diplomatic normalization. But, in part because of Congressional criticism, especially after the House shifted to a Republican majority with the 1994 mid-term elections (just two weeks after the Agreed Framework was signed), the Clinton administration took a relatively passive approach to US-DPRK relations. The Pyongyang leadership had expected significant steps toward normalization based on the Agreed Framework’s call for both sides to move toward normalized relations within months of signing the agreement. But this did not happen.

One area in which US-DPRK relations did move forward after 1994 was in the field of humanitarian assistance. This was not because of significant lifting of the US economic embargo of North Korea, although some relaxation did occur, but because of a humanitarian crisis in the DPRK. Floods devastated North Korea in 1995 and 1996, pushing an already fragile economy over the brink of disaster. Although the details of the famine of the late 1990s will probably never be fully clear, the number of famine-related deaths was likely in the hundreds of thousands, possibly even in the millions. Countries around the world, including the United States, responded with donations of food, medicine, and other forms of humani-
tarian assistance. The absolute amount of aid given by the United States was greater than that of any other donor country – totaling perhaps one billion dollars, including oil given through KEDO – and for a time North Korea became the largest beneficiary of US food aid in the world, as well as the largest beneficiary of American aid in East Asia.\textsuperscript{12}

Humanitarian aid did not lead to substantial progress in normalization, however. It took another security crisis – North Korea’s launching of a Taepodong missile over Japan in August 1998 – to push the United States into more active engagement with the DPRK. North Korea claimed, as Western intelligence sources later verified, that the missile launch was a failed attempt to send a satellite into orbit rather than a test of its military capability – although it could very well have been both. Nevertheless, the missile launch, along with American suspicions about underground facilities at Kumchang-ri and North Korea’s threat to begin reprocessing the spent plutonium withdrawn from the Yongbyon plant, raised alarms in Washington and refocused the Clinton administration’s attention on North Korea.

To address this new crisis, President Clinton appointed his former secretary of defense, William J. Perry, to visit the DPRK and lead a task force to review and assess US policy toward North Korea. The resulting “Perry Report” of October 1999 called for renewed engagement, alongside a strong deterrence, which built on the Agreed Framework and led through a series of specified steps to “comprehensive normalization of relations and establishment of a permanent peace.”\textsuperscript{13} Following on the Perry Report, US-DPRK relations moved forward again. The historic high point of the relationship came in the fall of 2000. In an unprecedented high-level visit, DPRK Vice-Marshal Jo Myong-rok – in effect the number two man in Pyongyang after Kim Jong Il – met with President Clinton in Washington, and shortly after Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. The two sides renewed their commitment to work toward normal relations, and North Korea appeared to be on the verge of agreeing to curtail its missile development and exports, a major US concern. But such hopes were soon dashed, partly because of North Korea’s lack of movement on a missile deal, and partly because of the disputed presidential election in the United States, which occupied Clinton’s attention and inhibited any bold diplomatic moves in the waning months of his administration. The Bush victory effectively put an end to the evolving policy of engagement.

**The reverse course on North Korea**

The forward momentum in US-DPRK relations that began to finally emerge toward the end of the Clinton administration, dramatized by the highest-level official exchanges ever between the two countries, was suspended after the election of George W. Bush. The new administration promised to “review” its Korea policy, and for a year US policy toward North Korea
appeared uncertain and adrift. The visit of South Korean President Kim Dae Jung to the White House shortly after George W. Bush’s inauguration did not auger well for a US-South Korean united front toward the DPRK. Kim’s meeting with Bush was awkward at best, and the new US administration made no secret of its doubts about Kim’s “sunshine policy” of engagement with the North. The deterioration of US-South Korean relations, which would soon plummet to historic lows of mistrust, is covered elsewhere in this volume. As far as North Korea was concerned, the Bush administration generally viewed the Agreed Framework as little more than appeasement and the Sunshine Policy as dangerously naïve. Attitudes in Washington toward engagement with Pyongyang hardened, and movement toward normalization soon went into reverse.

In fact, the administration did not have one voice on North Korea. The “hardliners” who tended to dominate the White House and the Department of Defense almost reflexively opposed dialogue with the DPRK, whereas the State Department leaned toward a “softer,” more diplomatic approach. A limited dialogue between the United States and North Korea began again in 2002, initiated by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who announced that the United States was willing to speak with the DPRK at “any time, any place, without preconditions.” A few high-level “North Korea hands” from the Clinton administration remained in the State Department, but several gave up in frustration. For instance, Jack Pritchard, special envoy for negotiations with North Korea, resigned in August 2003 just days before Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue were to begin in Beijing.14 Contradicting this more conciliatory approach was the bombastic rhetoric from George W. Bush himself, who told journalist Bob Woodward that he “loathed” Kim Jong Il and would like to see the regime “topple.” In his January 2002 State of the Union speech, Bush had named North Korea as part of an “axis of evil” that included Iran and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.15

The DPRK responded harshly to Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech. A Foreign Ministry spokesman called the 2002 speech “little short of declaring war against the DPRK” and accused the US administration of “political immaturity and moral leprosy.”16 In contrast to the condemnation of the Al Qaeda-led attacks that North Korea had expressed immediately after September 11, the DPRK spokesman this time suggested that America had only itself to blame: “Herein lie answers to questions as to why the modern terrorism is focused on the US alone and why it has become serious while Bush is in office.”17 North Korea’s proven connections to international terrorist networks, meanwhile, were tenuous at best. The only terrorists harbored in DPRK territory were a few aging Japanese Red Army Faction hijackers, hardly considered a threat to anyone, and in recent years North Korea had signed a number of international anti-terrorist agreements. In September 2002, Kim Jong Il personally apologized to Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro for North Korea’s kidnapping of Japanese civilians in the 1970s and 1980s, promising that such acts would never be
repeated. The DPRK was clearly trying to distance itself from any association with terror tactics, and the idea that it was connected to Islamist terrorist networks, or participated in anything like an “Axis” with Iraq and Iran, strained credulity. It may be hard for Americans to imagine North Korea as an ally in the “war on terror,” but by conflating North Korea with global terrorism, the Bush administration guaranteed a hostile response from Pyongyang, exacerbating the US-DPRK conflict and undermining what remained of progress in relations with North Korea.

The Defense Department continued to see North Korea as a potential target for nuclear retaliation. It revised its war plans for Korea to include “Operations Plan 5030,” a plan some US officials saw as “a strategy to topple Kim’s regime by destabilizing its military forces” short of all-out war, for example, by flying American fighter planes close to North Korea to divert the DPRK’s air defenses. Ultimately, however, the Pentagon itself viewed military options as highly problematic, given the catastrophic results a war with North Korea would bring about. The subsequent overstretch of US military forces in Afghanistan and Iraq after 2003 made war an even less realistic option. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the Bush administration regarding both Iraq and North Korea seemed to suggest that “rogue states” with weapons of mass destruction were to be eliminated rather than bargained with. During the lead-up to war in Iraq, the general thrust of US policy appeared to be “regime change” in Pyongyang, not diplomacy.

Amid this atmosphere of tension and uncertainty, the Bush administration finally sent a high-level envoy to Pyongyang in early October 2002, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly. Far from a diplomatic breakthrough, Kelly’s visit triggered a new crisis in US-DPRK relations, a second nuclear crisis that was almost a replay of the first, but with an accelerated timetable and even higher stakes. Kelly did not bring a message of reconciliation from the Bush administration, as the North Koreans expected, but an ultimatum: he confronted his North Korean hosts with evidence that the DPRK had been engaged in a secret program of enriching uranium for the purpose of developing nuclear weapons. Although enriching uranium was not strictly a violation of the Agreed Framework, it was clearly contrary to the goal of creating a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and did directly violate a 1992 North-South Korean agreement on denuclearization. According to Kelly’s account of the event, Vice-Foreign Minister Kang Sok-ju not only admitted to the charge (later denied by the North Koreans) but claimed that the DPRK had the right to weapons “even more powerful.” The Bush administration delayed announcing this astonishing news for eleven days – as it turned out, until Congress had already passed the resolution authorizing the war on Iraq. On October 16, the State Department released the news of the “Kelly revelations” and announced that as a result of its admission of a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program, North Korea was in “material breach” of the Agreed Framework. On November 14, KEDO suspended delivery of fuel oil to the DPRK. Food assistance to North
Korea was drastically cut back. The Agreed Framework was all but officially dead, and the United States and North Korea were on the brink of a crisis as dangerous as that of the early 1990s.

Pyongyang concurred that the Agreed Framework had collapsed, but blamed the United States for breaking the agreement. North Korea accused the United States, essentially, of bad faith: it pointed to, among other things, the lack of progress in lifting the economic embargo, the setbacks in normalization, and the failure to build the light-water reactors on time as indications that the United States had never been serious about abiding by the Agreed Framework in the first place. Not least, the nuclear policy of the Bush administration, by naming North Korea specifically as a potential target of nuclear attack in its Nuclear Posture Review of late 2001, directly contravened Article Three, Paragraph One of the Agreed Framework, which called for the United States to "provide formal assurances to the DPRK, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the United States." North Korea denied the accusation that it had an HEU program, and the United States did not share publicly any new intelligence it may have had on the issue. But even if North Korea had broken the agreement by starting a uranium enrichment program, the timing of the Kelly revelations was peculiar, as US intelligence had suspected North Korea of engaging in such a program since the late 1990s. It seemed the Bush administration was deliberately using this old intelligence to scuttle the Agreed Framework. If this was so, they succeeded.

As it had in 1993, North Korea threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty – only this time, it carried out its threat. Pyongyang removed the camera monitors from the Yongbyon facility and kicked out the IAEA inspectors, unsealed the 8,000 plutonium rods, restarted the reactor, and announced that it would start reprocessing the spent fuel. The US response was inconsistent and even self-contradictory. On the one hand, the Bush administration announced that a North Korean nuclear weapons program was "intolerable" and the United States would never give in to "blackmail." On the other hand, the United States did not clarify what steps it would take if North Korea crossed the line into nuclear weapons production or even what that line would be. Strangest of all, the Bush administration refused even to call the situation with North Korea a "crisis," just at the moment when it was gearing up for war with Iraq on the basis of – what proved to be faulty – evidence that Iraq was producing weapons of mass destruction. To be sure, the United States made threatening gestures by mobilizing bombers and an aircraft carrier from elsewhere in the Pacific to within striking range of Korea, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld boasted before the Iraq invasion that the United States could fight a two-front war if necessary. But the main Bush administration line was that the North Korea problem would be solved "diplomatically," even if by "diplomacy" the United States seemed to mean making unilateral demands on the North Koreans rather than anything resembling negotiation.
The Bush administration proposal to solve the second nuclear crisis, first articulated in early 2003, was characteristically one-sided. The United States would consider offering North Korea renewed energy aid, humanitarian assistance, and a promise not to attack the country – the latter being North Korea’s main demand after the October 2002 crisis broke out – but only after North Korea completely dismantled its nuclear program and agreed to extensive and intrusive international inspections. Eventually this US demand would become known as “CVID”: complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s entire nuclear energy and weapons program. North Korea responded with typically bombastic and threatening rhetoric, hinting that it would react to any American escalation or outright attack with nuclear retaliation against South Korea, Japan, and even the United States itself. But Pyongyang’s negotiating position remained consistent: the United States should give up its “hostile policy toward the DPRK” through a non-aggression agreement, in return for which North Korea would agree to verification that it was not manufacturing nuclear weapons.21

The Bush administration countered North Korea’s demand for bilateral talks by insisting in turn on multilateral talks that involved North Korea’s regional neighbors. Furthermore, the United States initially refused to “negotiate” the nuclear issue even within such talks. In particular, the United States wanted to involve China, seen to have special leverage over North Korea due to their long history of relations and China’s indispensable role as supplier of oil and food. In the absence of formal US-DPRK relations, Beijing had long been a neutral site for high-level meeting between the two governments, and in April 2003 North Korean, American, and Chinese officials met in Beijing to discuss a way out of the current impasse. The crisis continued. North Korea dropped hints of developing its own nuclear deterrent. The United States, while stating it did not intend to attack the DPRK, acted as if coercion and pressure alone would resolve the problem – by North Korea either giving in to American demands or collapsing.

President Bush, who pushed so strongly for war in Iraq, called for the world to give diplomacy a chance in North Korea. “Diplomacy failed for 11 years in Iraq,” Bush claimed during the 2004 presidential campaign. “And this new diplomatic effort is barely a year old.”22 Leaving aside the question of whether diplomacy in Iraq “failed” or was simply discarded, the United States had been engaged in diplomacy with North Korea for a decade, a history upon which the Bush administration refused to build. In the end, the United States had little choice but to return to diplomacy, in effect bringing US-DPRK relations back to 1993. War was simply not a viable option if the United States wanted to avoid disaster in North-east Asia and while military forces were bogged down in Central Asia and the Middle East.

Meanwhile, however, many things had changed in North Korea, on the Korean peninsula, and in North-east Asia. The countries in the region, including Russia, China, and even Japan – which hewed closest to the US position, in part because of its security dependence on Washington – were
willing to be more flexible and accommodating toward the DPRK than the United States was. Equally if not more important, inter-Korean relations had changed significantly since the days when ROK President Kim Young Sam feared a US-DPRK agreement would go against South Korean interests. The engagement policies of Kim Dae Jung and his successor, Roh Moo Hyun, had created a new dynamic on the Korean peninsula that ran counter to the hard-line US approach.

A changing Korean peninsula

On the Korean peninsula itself, the trajectory was almost exactly the opposite of the increasingly hostile US-North Korean relationship. North–South relations in the new millennium had never been better, as exemplified above all by the Kim Jong Il–Kim Dae Jung summit in Pyongyang in June 2000. To be sure, the high hopes of the June 2000 summit remain largely unfulfilled. Kim Jong Il never made the reciprocal visit to South Korea promised at the time of the summit, which caused no small embarrassment for and opposition criticism of Kim Dae Jung. The inter-Korean railways and roads were officially reopened, but no traffic flowed on them. The South Korean tours to the Kumgang Mountains in eastern North Korea, sponsored by the Hyundai conglomerate, turned out to be a major money-losing venture. Nevertheless, the symbolic value of the North-South summit was enormous, if only for signaling that North Korea was rejoining the wider world. Beginning with the normalization of ties with Italy in January 2000, North Korea launched an unprecedented diplomatic courtship of western countries. Within two years, Pyongyang had established diplomatic relations with all but two of the European Union member states, the EU itself, Canada, Australia, the Philippines, Brazil, and New Zealand. In July 2000, with Seoul’s encouragement, North Korea joined the ASEAN Regional Forum for intra-Asian security dialogue. North Korea also attempted to mend fences with Russia, and Kim Jong Il visited both China and Russia in 2001, his first official visits abroad as North Korean leader. After a decade of inward-looking crisis management and confusion, North Korea – with South Korea’s help and encouragement – had made a dramatic turn outward.

In terms of economic life, there were some indications of change – and even the use of the heretofore taboo word “reform” – in both the rhetoric and the observable reality of DPRK life. Since the economic crisis began to emerge in the early 1990s, long before the famine, there had been signs of liberalization and the growth of local markets in the North Korean economy, what one American observer calls “reform by stealth.” This trend accelerated by the end of the decade. In January 2001, the Rodong Sinmun announced a policy of “New Thinking” (Saeroun kwanjom), which called for scrapping outmoded habits and mentalities and putting all efforts into the technological reconstruction of North Korea.
The very phrase “New Thinking” was strikingly reminiscent of language former Soviet leader Gorbachev used during his campaign of perestroika (restructuring), and in the North Korean case the term emphasized ideological and economic flexibility, industrial restructuring, and a focus on computers and information technology. In order to accomplish this, the DPRK demonstrated a new willingness to learn from the outside world. In 2001, for example, North Korea sent nearly 500 government officials and students abroad to study technical subjects, economics, and business, mostly in other Asian countries and in Australia – almost triple the number Pyongyang had sent in 2000. There were even a small number of North Korean students studying, with little fanfare or publicity, in the United States. Beneath the radar, as it were, North Korean-US relations were still moving quietly forward, part of an evident wider strategy of forging new external connections and ties.

Despite heightened tensions with the United States, North Korea continued on the path of internal reform. A year after the official launch of “New Thinking,” the 2002 New Year’s Joint Editorial in the three main official DPRK newspapers celebrated the “successes” of the previous year and renewed the call for “radical change” in the economy. In March 2002, the Supreme People’s Assembly, North Korea’s highest legislative body, approved a budget emphasizing technical innovation and modernization. The second half of 2002 saw some of the boldest steps yet toward real reform in the DPRK. At the beginning of July 2002, the DPRK had begun to institute some of the most far-reaching economic changes since the regime was founded in 1948. The food distribution system on which much of the population had depended (at least until the famine of the 1990s) was reduced and modified; the price of rice was raised to near-market levels, and wages were correspondingly increased as much as thirty-fold; the official exchange rate for the North Korean won was reduced from 2.2 to nearly 200 to the dollar, approaching the black market rate; and the taxation system, abolished in 1974, was reportedly revived.

The results of this economic restructuring were mixed. Foreign companies did not flock to North Korea as Pyongyang’s leaders might have hoped. A model Special Economic Zone (SEZ) established in the city of Sinuiju on the Sino-North Korean border failed to take off when Chinese authorities arrested the man personally appointed by Kim Jong Il to run the SEZ, a wealthy Chinese native of Dutch citizenship named Yang Bin, before he could start the project. North Korea was beset by inflation, and while senior party officials and other elites with access to foreign exchange could cope with the changes, many ordinary North Koreans were adversely affected by the rise in food prices. But the DPRK government did not retract the July 2002 reforms and continued to call for restructuring. It even attempted to revive the Sinuiju SEZ project under an appointed leader even more unlikely than Yang Bin: Julie Rixiang Sa, a Korean-born, ethnic Chinese US citizen, and former (Republican) mayor of Fullerton,
At the same time, the DPRK started to announce a new “military-first politics” and the need for stronger defense against “imperialism.” These moves can be interpreted as a reaction to changed external circumstances, above all a US administration perceived as more dangerously hostile to North Korea’s existence as well as a defense of the military’s domestic interests in a new age of North Korean perestroika. The 2003 New Year’s Joint Editorial combined militaristic rhetoric with renewed calls for change in the economy and repeated the earlier slogan of “ensuring the greatest profitability while firmly adhering to socialist principles.” The DPRK seemed determined to continue with economic reform under the firm control of the party-military apparatus, perhaps even moving toward a military-led modernizing state somewhat along the lines of South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s.

The new-millennium North Korea combined economic changes at home with a strongly defensive posture toward the United States, in which the language of nuclear deterrence occupies a more explicit position than ever before. As in the early 1990s, it is difficult to tell whether the DPRK genuinely wants a nuclear deterrent or is primarily using the threat of developing nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip to gain economic assistance. It may be both. After the October 2002 crisis, North Korea maintained a consistent position – a call for a security guarantee from the United States in exchange for giving up its nuclear program – through the first three rounds of the Six-Party Talks. The United States first responded by insisting it would not “pay for the same horse twice” (i.e., go back to the 1994 agreement, which the Bush administration portrayed as having been unilaterally broken by North Korea), but later suggested that such a deal might be possible. However, after the third round of the Six-Party Talks ended inconclusively in June 2004, with the United States still insisting that North Korea freeze its nuclear program before any action on the American side, North Korea ratcheted up the rhetoric of its claims to possessing nuclear weapons.

In September 2004, the DPRK announced its unwillingness to proceed to a fourth round of talks. The venue for this announcement could not have been more public: a speech at the UN General Assembly by DPRK Vice-Foreign Minister Choe Su-hon. The main reason North Korea could not participate in further talks, Choe said, was the “hostile policy” of the United States, especially its insistence on CVID and its real intention of overthrowing the North Korean regime. In light of this, “the DPRK is left with no other option but to possess a nuclear deterrent.” At a press conference following the speech, Choe clarified the point that North Korea had already reprocessed the 8,000 spent fuel rods from the Yongbyon plant and had “weaponized” the material. Nevertheless, Choe said, North Korea would still be willing to dismantle its nuclear program if the United States abandoned its hostile policy and normalized relations with the DPRK. In other words, North Korea was still playing the same game of brinksmanship of the
early 1990s. Only now the stakes were even higher. In effect, North Korea was revealing its hand, claiming to actually possess nuclear weapons rather than leaving the issue ambiguous. Still, without a nuclear test by the North Koreans, this claim was impossible for outsiders to verify.

The second Bush administration

In the midst of this impasse in US-North Korean relations, George W. Bush was elected to a second term as US President. The Pyongyang leadership may have been hoping for victory in the US presidential election to go to John Kerry, who had suggested in his debates with Bush that as president he would engage straightaway in bilateral talks with the DPRK. Whatever the case, North Korea seemed to find the second Bush administration just as hostile as the first, if not more so. Pyongyang seized upon Condoleezza Rice’s reference to North Korea as an “outpost of tyranny” in her inauguration speech as the new Secretary of State, claiming that this and other statements proved that the “true intention of the second-term Bush administration is not only to further its policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK pursued by the first-term office but to escalate it.” On 10 February 2005, the DPRK Foreign Ministry confirmed that North Korea had “manufactured nukes” and was now a “nuclear weapons state.” Nevertheless, North Korea insisted that nuclear weapons were purely for self-defense against a hostile United States, and the official Korea Central News Agency reiterated that “[t]he DPRK’s principled stand to solve the issue through dialogue and negotiations and its ultimate goal to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula remains unchanged.” In the meantime, until US attitudes and policy toward North Korea shifted to one of peaceful co-existence, the nuclear issue could not be resolved and the North Korea would stay out of the Six-Party Talks. North Korea thus blamed the United States for the suspension of the Six-Party Talks, but left the door open for their resumption.

In fact, however, the line-up for the second Bush foreign policy team did not necessarily indicate the ascendancy of the hardliners. To be sure, some of the pro-engagement voices from the first administration, including Secretary of State Powell and Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage, had been removed. On the other hand, Undersecretary of State John Bolton, among the hardest of the hardliners, was, for better or worse, appointed ambassador to the United Nations in early August 2005. Although Rice’s position on North Korea remained unclear, pro-negotiation forces appeared to make some headway in the State Department and National Security Council with the appointment of Victor Cha, one of the few genuine Korea experts in the US government, as director for Asia policy in the NSC; and the appointment of veteran negotiator Christopher Hill, first, as ambassador to the Republic of Korea, and then as US representative to the Six-Party Talks.
The new Bush team seemed initially focused on playing the “China card” by encouraging Beijing to pressure North Korea into returning to the Six-Party Talks under conditions more favorable to the United States. Michael Green, NSC Senior Director of Asia Policy, visited Tokyo, Seoul, and Beijing in January 2005, and Secretary Rice followed the same route. Hill also visited Beijing, with a similar aim: to create a coalition of support for the US position on the North Korea nuclear issue and, above all, to apply China’s allegedly substantial leverage over Pyongyang to force North Korean concessions. Chinese President Hu Jintao met North Korean Premier Pak Pong-ju in Beijing in March, where Hu expressed China’s concerns about the nuclear issue to his North Korean visitors, while the North Koreans reiterated their new status as a “nuclear weapons state” and insisted on bilateral talks with the United States in order for Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks.

Meanwhile a US team led by Ambassador Joseph DeTrani pursued “informal” dialogue with North Korean representatives in New York. This, rather than any putative Chinese pressure, appeared to get the Six-Party Process back on track. In June 2005, the movement toward renewed US-DPRK formal dialogue rapidly picked up momentum. On June 10, President Bush met with ROK President Roh Moo Hyun in Washington. On June 17, as part of a South Korean delegation visiting Pyongyang for the fifth anniversary of the June 15 North–South Summit, ROK Unification Minister Chung Dong Young met with Kim Jong Il, and Kim conveyed to him North Korea’s desire to return to the Six-Party Talks by the end of July. Later, Minister Chung explained that South Korea had promised to supply electricity to the North in order to help resolve the nuclear issue, as North Korea had long insisted that its nuclear program was primarily intended to alleviate its severe energy shortages. Finally, on July 10, North Korea announced that it would return to the talks. Secretary Rice insisted that the US position had not changed: “We are not talking about enhancement of the current proposal,” that is, the proposal of June 2004.

During the 13 months the talks had been suspended, both the United States and North Korea insisted they would not move from their respective positions. But a close reading of each side’s rhetoric and actions during that time suggested otherwise. North Korea had begun to speak of “peaceful coexistence” rather than outright normalization or a peace agreement in the immediate future; the United States referred to North Korea’s “sovereignty” and quietly pursued bilateral discussions with the DPRK both in New York and Beijing. As the talks began on July 25, North Korean and American diplomats met in Beijing for extensive one-on-one discussions, despite the longstanding US resistance to bilateral talks. Ambassador Hill described a step-by-step process of each side working simultaneously to resolve the nuclear standoff, rather than North Korea conceding everything up front; he described this as “words for words and actions for actions,” exactly the phrase the North Koreans had long used. Hill’s North Korean counterpart,
chief negotiator Kim Kye Gwan, opened his remarks with a more conciliatory, less belligerent tone than earlier North Korean statements. Compared to the accusations and threats that had characterized US-North Korean dialogue in previous months, the fourth round of Six-Party Talks marked a reasonably good start to what few doubted would be a long, difficult process toward resolving the nuclear issue.

There was no clear consensus within the United States, much less among the six negotiating partners, about the nature and extent of the North Korean nuclear threat itself. North Korea, of course, claimed that its weapons were purely defensive and still hinted that they could be negotiated away for the right price. American intelligence estimated that North Korea had reprocessed enough plutonium before the 1994 freeze to manufacture one or two bombs; by mid-2005 the DPRK might have been able to produce a half-dozen more. Whether North Korea had the capacity to deliver such weapons, and particularly to US territory, was quite another question. The Bush administration had also never made it entirely clear what the “red line” would be beyond which North Korean actions would provoke a harsh American response. Testing a nuclear bomb might be one such action; verifiable delivery of a nuclear device or fuel to a third party, such as a terrorist organization, would almost certainly bring on American retribution.

Nor was it clear what form an American response to “unacceptable” North Korean actions would take. Bringing the issue to the UN Security Council was unlikely to have much effect so long as China, and probably Russia as well, opposed coercive action against the DPRK. Applying strict sanctions, in the hopes that an economic blockade would precipitate a collapse of the North Korean regime, would not necessarily have the intended effect, and could not in any case be implemented without South Korean and Chinese cooperation – and neither Seoul nor Beijing wanted such an outcome. A surgical strike, such as the Clinton administration had contemplated against the Yongbyon plant in June 1994, was much more problematic after the plutonium rods had been removed and secreted, and the highly enriched uranium program – if indeed it existed – remained hidden. Under the circumstances, the United States has little choice but to test North Korea’s intentions through negotiation and dialogue, and to work toward a peaceful, diplomatic solution to the nuclear crisis. As for North Korea, it had relied on “strategic ambiguity” regarding its nuclear program, a strategy that is not indefinitely sustainable. All parties concerned, including China and South Korea, opposed North Korea’s nuclear weapons development and supported a nuclear-free Korean peninsula. If North Korea truly valued political normalization and economic improvement over the possession of a nuclear arsenal, as it as long claimed, then it had to be forthcoming about its nuclear program and put an end to its policy of ambiguity.

The options that the United States currently faces in dealing with the DPRK encompass the same range as under previous American administra-
tions: coercion, isolation, or engagement. The first Bush administration reversed the previous US policy of engagement and leaned toward isolation and pressure to enforce a change of behavior from North Korea. This approach failed. In the end, however reluctantly, the United States has pursued an engagement policy of sorts through the Six-Party Talks.

North Korea has through most of its existence depended for its survival on some kind of deterrent against the vastly more powerful, nuclear armed and explicitly hostile United States. It has also learned that the best way to attract the attention of the United States is to claim progress toward or possession of nuclear weapons. It is perfectly logical, then, for the DPRK to consider and pursue a nuclear weapons program. However, it is unlikely that North Korea would see much benefit in actually using such weapons, since the Pyongyang leadership knows their country would be devastated by an American counterattack. While the US government has focused on the existence or non-existence of North Korean nuclear weapons, the important consideration for North Korea is an end to its hostile relationship with the United States. Nuclear deterrence may be one way of ensuring this; explicit guarantees of nonaggression and the normalization of relations with the United States are another. A policy of isolation, much less coercion, is unlikely to convince North Korea to drop its nuclear program. On the contrary, it strongly encourages the DPRK to develop a nuclear deterrent. And even if North Korea were to collapse, the results – in terms of refugee flows, humanitarian crises, and the possibility of a more coercive regime in North Korea or even a civil war – could be even worse than the current situation.

Only a genuine engagement, one that recognizes the security concerns of both sides and is negotiated through a process of give-and-take, can put an end to the fifty-year crisis over Korea. It is time to move beyond the nuclear issue to change the dynamic in and around the Korean peninsula, put an end to the Korean War, and bring US-North Korean relations out of the cold.

Notes
6 Ibid., p. 132.
10 Article Two of the Agreed Framework called for the two sides to “move toward full normalization of political and economic relations,” including, in Section One, the reduction of trade and investment barriers “within three months of the date of this document.” Sigal, op. cit., p. 263.
17 Ibid.
19 In 1994, General Gary Luck, then commander of US forces in Korea, estimated that a war between the US and North Korea could kill one million people. Sigal, op. cit., p. 122.
31 “North Korea: Progress at a Snail’s Pace,” The Economist, 11 October 2003, p. 43.
34 Ruediger Frank, “The End of Socialism and a Wedding Gift for the Groom? The True Meaning of Military First Policy”; http://www.nautilus.org/DPRK_BriefingBook/transition/Ruediger_Socialism.html
36 For the full text of the DPRK statement, see CanKor No. 181, 1 October 2004; http://www.cankor.ligi.ubc.ca/index.html
44 Ibid.
The fiftieth anniversary of the US-South Korea alliance came and went without much fanfare. There were public gatherings to mark and commemorate the relationship on both sides of the Pacific, but hardly a joyful note of celebration was struck on either side. Rather, the anniversary year of 2003–4 began with tens of thousands of South Koreans spilling onto the streets to light candles in the dark to demand accountability for the death of two Korean girls run over by an armored vehicle driven by uniformed US Forces Korea (USFK) soldiers. They were protesting perceived American injustice and arrogance toward the Korean nation. Denunciations of the US war on Iraq, anger over the Pentagon’s fait accompli to reduce and restructure troops stationed in Korea, and disillusion with US policy toward the peninsula in general and North Korea in particular continued through the months.

Americans were not in a partying mood either that year. Hurt over the “ungratefulness” of American sacrifice and heroism in the Korean War, confusion over how Korean sentiment could “all of a sudden” change from hot to cold, and doubts about South Korean rationality in pursuing unrequited reconciliation with the “evil” North Korean regime all perplexed the American public. Expressions of a growing “anti-Koreanism” in reaction to Korean “anti-Americanism” could be heard in Washington, as couched threats by some Americans and as fears by some Koreans. And Korean and American elites echoed one another’s worries about the health and viability of the alliance and the need for some kind of change.

Change is indeed the keyword to describe the current state of the US-Korea alliance. With the implementation of the Pentagon’s Global Posture Review underway, one-third of US forces (12,500 troops) are about to leave South Korea, and thousands more will shift to new locations on the peninsula. The dispatch of 3,600 troops to Iraq marks the first time since the establishment of the Mutual Defense Treaty that permanently based troops have been deployed for a mission not related to the defense of South Korea. From November 2004, the Republic of Korea (ROK) Army took on sole responsibility for the near-sacred duty of guarding the demilitarized zone (DMZ), a commitment that had been primarily borne by the US army since
the demarcation of the 38th parallel. US troops will concentrate their numbers south of the Han River within a few years and military technology will compensate for the increased distance from the North Korean frontline. And after decades of start-and-stop talks, the USFK headquarters will move out of Yongsan base in Seoul and free up precious urban real estate. At a joint press conference to announce the tenth round of the Future of Alliance Talks, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Asia-Pacific Richard Lawless optimistically claimed that by freeing up some land used by the American military, the US government will be “thereby satisfying the longstanding wishes and desires of the inhabitants of those communities in Korea” and that “when fully implemented, the agreement will . . . greatly enhance, in our view, public support for our military presence in the Republic of Korea.”

To facilitate these changes, the South Korean government must acquire new land and redevelop the tracts returned by the US forces, adapt old and new infrastructure, and prepare local residents to accommodate the exit and entry of thousands of American troops, civilian personnel, and related family members around the southern half of the Korean peninsula. In many ways, this last task, negotiating with the Korean public, may prove to be the most difficult challenge.

The United States is transforming its military alliance with South Korea to reflect changes in strategy and advances in technology. But Washington has failed to take into account the profound changes that have taken place in the nature of South Korean politics and society. US failure to understand these new democratic dynamics has contributed to increased tensions at an inter-governmental level, angry demonstrations in South Korea, and the lack of a united response to a variety of regional issues including the nuclear crisis with North Korea.

Digging out (of) secrets

In early 2003, President Roh Moo Hyun kicked off his term with a campaign for “participatory democracy” and invited private citizens to help him form his cabinet by nominating members themselves. In addition to supporting greater civic participation in politics, Roh campaigned on a platform of greater military equality in the South Korean-US relationship. These two programs, one the deepening of democracy at home and the other the application of democracy to foreign affairs, seem to have accentuated rifts in the US-South Korean alliance.

Still, had Roh’s conservative opponent Lee Hoe Chang become president in 2002, much of the tensions in the bilateral relationship would have occurred anyway, given the deep and rapid structural changes occurring within and outside Korean society. Domestically, Koreans were experimenting with various dimensions of democracy and clearing new political space and articulating new voices. They were encouraged by and acted in tandem with the growing regional transnational networks and international
norms of democracy, transparency, globalization, human security, and civil society empowerment popularized by Western governments, the United Nations, and public opinion makers around the world during the ephemeral decade of post-Cold War relief and euphoria. These new forces, more than the political platforms of any given Korean politician, had a powerful impact on relations with the United States.

For starters, South Korea in the 1990s joined a global trend of digging out secrets and atrocities that had been buried in official narratives and the popular conscience. As the millennium approached, this trend turned into a near obsession for uncovering and claiming redress for past wrongs – recovering the stolen art of holocaust victims, recovering the corporate collusion with Nazis, bring to trial the rapists, torturers, and genocidal killers from former Yugoslavia, and activating the South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In Korea, meanwhile, both the government and independent commissions investigated the Kwangju uprising and massacre and the missing persons under the authoritarian rule of Park Chung Hee, Chun Doo Hwan, and Roh Tae Woo. Foreign powers became a particularly well-publicized target of inquiry into past abuses of private citizens. The cheongsindae (“comfort women”) movement took center stage in the first half of the decade as activists and survivors filed lawsuits against the Japanese government, lobbied the United Nations for support, and captured international attention and sympathy at various conferences. After 50 years of silence, news of the alleged US army massacre of hundreds of Korean civilians in Nogun-ri during the Korean War made headlines around the world.

At the same time, violence against Korean women by foreign militaries reverberated as a political theme with the brutal murder of the prostituted bar-worker, Yun Geumi, in the fall of 1992 in Dongducheon City. Immediately following Yun’s death, civic groups such as the Dongducheon Citizens’ Committee, taxi drivers’ union, teachers’ union, and various student associations protested against the brutality of US soldiers and demanded that the Korean police undertake a thorough inquiry. They also conducted their own investigations of the incident and declared that the Korean government should have jurisdiction over the case and should have custody of the alleged killer, Private Kenneth Markle, a member of the US Second Infantry Division. In addition, civic groups circulated petitions and staged large demonstrations at the front gates of the division headquarters; the taxi drivers’ union and some local merchants refused to serve American military personnel. This was the first large-scale public display of anger and pursuit of redress for the violated life of a camptown (kijich’on) prostitute.

Although other women had died in similarly brutalized states, allegedly at the hands of US servicemen, Koreans generally had held to their moralistic view of such women as “throw-aways” and had ignored their plight and suffering. Local residents and the national public tried to ignore the camptown, for they viewed it as synonymous with prostitution, crime, the black
market, drug and alcohol abuse, moral decadence, and mixed race children. The few attempts by the prostituted women themselves to stage public protests against the US bases for what they felt was unfairness or injustice either received scant attention outside of the local camp areas or were suppressed by local authorities. Although officials in Seoul and Washington often have waxed romantic about the “special relationship” bound in blood between the two countries, “special” for the Koreans living and working in or near US bases has meant social stigma and marginalization from the rest of Korean society. Needing the US military for national security purposes was deemed legitimate, but not living closely with Americans in uniform. The alliance meant very different things for people who conducted it on paper in contrast to those who had to haggle over an extra dollar or won and endured racial slurs to feed their families and themselves.

The grievances generated by the presence of the US bases and the behavior of American troops have remained quite consistent throughout half a century, but the way they are framed politically, their social legitimacy, and various institutional responses to them have become radically different, pre- and post-democratization. During authoritarian times, the public expression of grievances toward the US forces could be equated with political dissidence and punished severely under the National Security Law. But after 1987, these grievances have been transformed into political “interests” – and matters of local autonomy, human rights, and “quality of life” issues – as citizens increasingly spoke out, mobilized, and pressured the central government under the flag of democracy. Under the two civilian presidents, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung:

> Improving the quality of life, overshadowed over the years as a result of the country’s growth-first strategy, was now to be an important part of the government’s mission. Multiple dimensions of national security from economic and ecological security... to communal and societal security... were also emphasized as forming the new and more comprehensive foreign and security policy agenda for South Korea.4

The decentralization of government functions and authority particularly emboldened local citizens and politicians and served to challenge the central government’s long monopoly on power, especially in the area of national security and foreign policy. The 1991 law permitting the establishment of elected local councils and the 1995 law allowing the popular election of local government officials served as the foundation for new autonomy from the provincial level on down. And the new Laws Relating to the Disclosure of Information by Public Organizations (established in 1996), which grew out of local initiatives for citizen access to government information, became another legal tool that citizens could use to demand government transparency, accountability, and consultation on relevant issues at all levels of government.
Therefore, since the mid-1990s, not only have Korean officials and government agencies increasingly been subjected to local residents’ scrutiny, but so have US authorities and individual Americans. Still, politicized locals have become frustrated with the seemingly irrelevant and impotent Korean laws with regard to US actions: the very laws that boost local residents’ access to information, transparency, and self-governance are not applicable within USFK compounds because the latter are governed by the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). Activists therefore have tended to view the SOFA and other limitations on citizen access to national security policy and information as an obstacle to exercising local democracy. Koreans had periodically clamored for the revision of the SOFA to reflect a “more equal” relationship between the two allies as the South Korean economy and polity grew in strength and status. But only during the 1990s, when national laws and political culture changed to empower and protect them, were activists able to turn SOFA reform into both a rallying cry against US dominance and a political objective.

As outgrowths of this new democratic culture, citizen groups have targeted US bases as objects of scrutiny, investigation, and policy critique. The economic, environmental, and social impact of military basing and closure has attracted much national and local attention in the United States and facilitated at times the cooperation of unlikely political partners. The same holds true for Korea. Indeed, the responsiveness of some local governments to residents’ complaints about the US presence and their cooperation with progressive civil groups is one of the most remarkable developments in the country’s democratization process. Until only a few years ago, local officials and citizen-activists who criticized the US military presence or advocated for the (alleged and real) victims of crimes and abuses by US personnel had treated one another with distrust and hostility. And, generally, local governments had kept a lid on local tensions and conflicts related to US troops in order to avoid the ire of the authoritarian Park and Chun regimes, as well as negative reactions from the US commands. Local leaders had served at Seoul’s whim and pleasure; local camptown economies were dependent on the US bases for employment and revenues from the 1950s until the 1980s.

No longer dependent on the bases for income, as they had been for decades, camptown residents and leaders today have grown ambitious about pursuing more competitive and productive modes of income generation as well as “upgrading” the image of the town. In May 2000, officials of the fourteen local governments that house US bases established a “nationwide consultative body” of local governments and later submitted legislation to the National Assembly that called for increased central government grants and aid to local governments, the establishment of local development committees at central and local levels, and thorough environmental impact assessments undertaken by the national government around US base areas. The consultative body explicitly stated that local areas near the US installa-
tions have long borne a disproportionate share of economic and social dislocations, as well as political underdevelopment as a result of the presence of foreign forces. For the first time in nearly half a century, local leaders began to challenge the central government’s near-monopoly of power over policies regarding the military alliance and to modify the notion of national security by insisting that external security be balanced with the needs of local residents and governing bodies. Their legislative proposal also urged the central government and the general public to remember that ultimately both the center and periphery are on the same side and should cooperate to strengthen their power and credibility in negotiations with the US side.

This kind of politics from below has been altering the dynamics of the alliance relationship from a top-down dictate approach, which had characterized Korean politics for most of its contemporary history, to a push–pull mode between organized citizens and the central government. For example, officials of the USFK and the South Korean government had a taste of local “people power” in the first part of the 1990s. When the Pyongtaek region, where the Osan Air Base is located, became the prospective site of the relocation of the USFK headquarters at Yongsan Garrison, a handful of Pyongtaek residents tried to prevent the move, eventually creating a nationwide campaign by the mid-1990s to reclaim the land that the US military occupied, used, or had open access to for training, storage or other official purposes. Called the “Return of Land” (banhwan) or “Reclaiming Our Land” (Uri ddang dwechatgi) movement, this effort helped bridge ideological, tactical, and resource gaps between Seoul-based activists and local camptown campaigners. A national network of hitherto disparate actors and interests related to US bases and national security issues was in the making.

Citizen efforts did not go ignored or unheeded by those in power. The Land Partnership Program (LPP), negotiated by Korean and American military officials and formally announced in March 2002, was in part a direct response to the civic demonstrations and demands by citizens and local governments for access to lands officially occupied by the US forces. Through the LPP, the United States committed to returning a bit over 50 percent of the land the USFK was using at the time of the negotiations, with the final transfers to be achieved by 2011. The consolidation effort was intended to increase the readiness and efficiency of the US forces and to meet Korean demands for land. The status of the Yongsan Garrison was not subject to the LPP negotiations, which took place before the Bush administration’s talk of global repositioning.

Simply put, the politics around the issue of US bases dramatically shows how messy, complex, and difficult foreign policy and national security planning and management have become in the context of the ROK-US relationship. What is astounding about the first dozen years of democracy in Korea has been the ease with which the personal became political after decades of the government suppression of individual rights and opinions and the repression of personal desires and needs in service of the collective,
be it family, society, or nation. Democracy has enabled the transformation of private complaints into political interests. Both private citizens and local communities are measuring the requirements and benefits of national security and foreign policy against what they consider to be unfair costs to them.

Since the early 1990s, not only local governments and residents but also an ever-growing and fast-changing configuration of civic organizations has entered the foreign policy arena with a sense of empowerment provided by new legal rights. For example, 74.2 percent of Korean NGOs were established in the first decade of democratization (1987–96). The most concentrated growth occurred during the administration of Kim Young Sam between 1993 and 1996 when 62 percent of civic organizations were established (as well as roughly half of all environmental, youth, and human right organizations). Until recently, the term “NGO” was nearly synonymous with progressive, liberal, or left-oriented causes. Many activist leaders had participated in anti-government demonstrations and campaigns during the turbulence of democracy activism in the 1980s.

In particular, the first half of the 1990s served as a crucible for the creation of organizations that have assumed leading roles in the organized criticism of US policies and the bilateral alliance. For example, activists created the National Campaign for the Eradication of Crimes by US Troops against Korean Civilians in 1993 in response to the brutal murder of Yun Geumi, who posthumously became a nationalist symbol of Korea’s powerlessness and “victimization” by the US and a catalyst for organized activism around the US troop presence.10 In 1994, local activists launched the aforementioned banhwan (return-of-land) movement to protest the proposed relocation of the Yongsan base to Pyongtaek/Osan. Additionally, in the middle of the decade, the progressive Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the aggressive environmental organization Green Korea United emerged as key backers of the coalitions that target US foreign policy. In 1997, politically assertive feminists created Women Making Peace. Moreover, People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, the large nationwide umbrella organization for progressive issues and citizen representation in domestic and international policy matters, was established in 1994. And from 1995 on, when negotiations on the revision of the SOFA resurfaced on the bilateral security agenda, activists and NGOs began to make their voices heard through the media and transnational networks. This coalition, though small in terms of active political workers, tirelessly mobilized at home and abroad for more advantageous terms for South Korea. They also readily publicized what they viewed as unfairness – to the Korean side – in the negotiation process or inadequacy on the part of their government officials to press their American counterparts.

And like the “comfort women” movement, which made its cause an international one, many new NGOs, particularly those criticizing US policy, have actively engaged in transnational networks to publicize their positions, share information with similar groups, and learn about protest methods, lawsuits,
petitions, and other instruments of political influence. They have received moral support for their political causes from a broader audience, which in turn has served to put additional pressure on governments. Korean NGOs have developed good working relationships with their counterparts in the Philippines, Okinawa and Japan, the United States, Vieques (Puerto Rico), Canada, Australia, and other countries where peace movements and anti-militarist groups, human rights, women’s rights activism, and environmentalism are salient in public life. Korean society is neither as discreet nor as discrete as policy-makers would like it to be. The fact that civic scrutiny of foreign policy, opposition to US policies, and critique of Korea-US relations is not simply “made in Korea” makes alliance management much more challenging for Korean and American elites alike.

The Internet has facilitated this transnational organizing. It has become the preferred political playing ground for Korea’s eager cybercrats (they call themselves “netizens”), most of whom are young and freewheeling in their thinking and writing. Korea is one of the most wired nations in the world, surpassing Japan and Taiwan in terms of Internet usage. In 1990, Seoul jumped to first place in 1998 in the number of domain registrations outside the United States. Young Koreans are constantly on line or never far away from being connected. According to one recent study, 77.3 percent of Koreans in their twenties reported that they had uploaded their opinion on an online site. Misinformation, empirically questionable interpretations, and at times vulgar rants about anything and everything the United States does and does not do abound, together with thought-provoking essays, calls for citizen deliberation, and clarification of laws and regulations that guide the bilateral alliance.

The expansion, diversification, and popularity of the Internet, mass media, art, and film industries in Korea have made critical scrutiny of politics in general and the US-Korea relationship in particular an important part of the public domain. Since the 1990s, novels, feature films, documentaries, and television programs have popularized such contentious topics as the corruption and abuse of Koreans by American troops, the US government’s role in dividing Korea, Japanese atrocities and Korean collaboration during colonial rule, and of course unification with the North. And among progressive activists and college students, cultural festivals to raise funds for assisting camptown women and Amerasian children abandoned by American fathers or to express criticism of the United States (and raise the political awareness of the larger society) have become commonplace. Rather than clandestine or secretive activities, these were explicit, public, and hopeful expressions of Korea’s “people power” in the eyes of the organizers.

Although negative depictions of foreign powers tend to dominate, Koreans are also engaged in self-reflection about their own abuses of power and victimization of foreign neighbors. Korea’s role in Vietnam is a case in point. The “official” storyline boasts of the bravery, self-sacrifice, and aggressive anti-Communism of the Korean troops who fought in Vietnam at
the behest of the United States. To counter this heroic narrative, Korean journalists and NGOs began a campaign for “truth-telling” and the redress of atrocities waged on Vietnamese civilians by Korean soldiers. Since the late 1990s, the Korean House for International Solidarity (KHIS) has investigated and publicized the need for people-to-people reconciliation between Korea and Vietnam. In 2000, they helped organize a goodwill “mission” to Vietnam, in which Korean dentists and other medical professionals volunteered their services for Vietnamese villagers and their descendants who had suffered violence at the hands of Korean troops. Even as they continued their coalitional work to press for a revision of the SOFA, KHIS organized and staged an annual music/arts festival to raise funds to assist Vietnamese victims of war and has been working with the progressive Hankyore Sinmun (Hankyore News) to attract money for a “peace park.” According to one of the leaders of KHIS, their fundraising efforts for the Vietnam project drew larger sums than any “anti-American” protest or program.

The work of KHIS is noteworthy for three reasons related to US-Korea relations. First, in contrast to the frequent complaints by American officials that Koreans only seek to criticize US policies and actions but overlook their own country’s faults, KHIS has insisted that Koreans take responsibility for past wartime atrocities and assist those who have survived rather than simply point fingers at Japan and the United States for their military abuses. Second, contrary to popular views that nationalism drives anti-Americanism, KHIS is addressing an issue that is quite “anti-nationalist” and unpopular among Koreans, especially the political elites and veterans. And, third, KHIS staff are intent on using the new democratic freedoms and the transnationalization of ideas and politics to address issues, interpretive frameworks, and audiences heretofore neglected or ignored by other Korean NGOs/activists and the general population.

Shifting identities

In Korea, past efforts to democratize society have produced laws, political institutions, and unexpected configurations of social mobilization. But they have also produced progressive-minded, experimentation-oriented, and outspoken youth who seem to confuse and confound the world-view and political sensibilities of older Koreans and most Americans. As sociologist Sook-Jong Lee points out:

One consequence of democratization and institutional reforms has been the economic decline of the older generation and the rise of the younger generation . . . The older generation is also being pushed to the political and social sidelines. This generation is perceived as supporting the status quo and resistant to reform . . . In addition, [the younger generation’s] easy access to information [technologies] and ability to create and mobilize political networks give them the ability to be an effective political force.
No one on either side of the Pacific outwardly blames democracy for making a mess of the “special alliance.” But Koreans and Americans both have eagerly echoed each other’s “explanation” that younger Koreans are to blame for the tensions, misunderstandings, and divergent interpretations and priorities that plague the two countries.

“Such is the temper of the times that South Korea’s most popular ‘bubblegum pop’ girl band – a heretofore entirely apolitical group with a reputation for extreme wholesomeness – released a harshly anti-American MTV-style video,” writes Nicholas Eberstadt. Youthful ignorance, shortsightedness, and “wishful thinking” (that North Koreans are not so dangerous and that South Koreans can afford to dislike the United States) form the refrain in his 2002 article in the National Interest. To underscore the correlation between naïveté and youth, he states that a 2001 survey of fifth and sixth graders in one of the most conservative provinces in the South found that 42 percent “identified North Korea as ‘the friendliest nation toward South Korea,’” with the United States playing second fiddle (39 percent). He blames the Kim Dae Jung administration and its overly optimistic brand of engagement policy for swaying the Korean public toward foolhardiness. Eberstadt is not a lone voice; such judgments abound in the United States, Korea, and other East Asian nations.

Indeed, age and support for the United States and the bilateral relationship do correlate. Even in the pre-democracy days of 1985, 78 percent of youth (versus 56 percent of the general public) believed that “Korea was too closely identified with the United States.” Major Korean surveys conducted between 1990 and 1992 also revealed that a higher proportion of those in their twenties (even more so among college students) held a negative opinion of the United States than people in their fifties and older. In the midst of heavy protests in the winter of 2002–3, a US State Department survey found that only 32 percent of those in their twenties viewed the United States favorably compared to 69 percent of respondents in their fifties and older. Moreover, only 22 percent of the younger cohort versus 42 percent of the older group considered the US military presence in Korea to be “very important.”

But younger Koreans are not unique in their critical attitudes toward the United States. According to the 2002 Pew Global Attitudes survey, 44 percent of Canadians below 30 years of age had unfavorable views of the US, compared to 20 percent in the 50–64 age group. Two decades earlier, during a time of anti-nuclear/anti-US protests led by the Greens and other progressives in West Germany, “[t]he German rejection of and mistrust toward the United States” was “especially pronounced among the younger generation.”

Youth by itself does not explain foreign policy orientation, and it does not necessarily translate into historical amnesia, blind nationalism, radicalism, or anti-Americanism. For example, in Japan, the traditional “enemy” of modern Koreans, the older generation, keeps its eyes, ears, and minds closed
to the realities of Japan’s war atrocities, while the younger generation is more willing to acknowledge past wrongs, mend old wounds, and forge new friendships with their regional neighbors. Japanese youth busily exchange views on the Internet, work together with Korean NGOs, and admire the cultural products (film, videos, music) imported from their nation’s ex-colony. And in turn, Korea’s most popular Internet portal, Daum, recently hosted 10,000 blogs and cafés dedicated to Japanese culture, compared with just fifty that promote anti-Japanese views; a newspaper survey also indicated that only a quarter of Koreans in their twenties said “they did not like Japan.”

Since the Kim Dae Jung administration’s initial elimination of legal prohibitions against Japanese cultural imports in 1998 and the lifting of bans on imported Japanese films, computer games, and comics, Korean youth have become avid consumers and producers of pop culture that is sweeping the East Asian region. The Financial Times called this “Korean Wave” a “phenomenon.”

In a sense, Asian youth are overcoming their received nationalism through the regionalization of pop culture, making connections across national and historical boundaries and stepping away from old enmities that the governments and the older generation seem unable or unwilling to do. Such developments are not without some cost to American power and influence. Japanese anthropologist Koichi Iwabuchi observes that there is a connection between the relative decline of American cultural power and the rise of “localized,” “Asianized” pop in much of East Asia in the past decade.

Such observations should not be mistaken for wishful thinking that hip hop and film can bridge decades of mutual suspicion and pave the way toward cooperation and peace for the future generations in Asia. Indeed, a survey published in the well-known monthly, Chosun Wolgan, found that 60.3 percent of Koreans in their twenties had unfavorable views of Japan, as opposed to 39.7 percent with favorable views. Yet, the article emphasized that there is a substantial generational gap in anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment between the young and those in their fifties. Among the latter, only 17.7 percent had favorable views of Japan, while a decisive 73 percent had unfavorable views. The causes of the generational shift in such sentiments are not clear, but if “soft power” through cultural attraction, imitation, and adoption is as potent a facilitator of shared values and supportive actions between national communities as Joseph Nye purports, then the increasingly shared culture among East Asian youth may be more politically loaded than currently recognized. It is not impossible to imagine the evolution of novel and creative regional identities among Asians in the next fifty years to come.

Perhaps most striking, two-thirds of South Koreans favor the creation of a borderless and integrated regional community of East Asian countries, including South Korea, China, and Japan, that would be similar to
Additionally, 78 percent favor (19 percent strongly) its creation without US participation.27

Democracy and the future of the alliance

A profound transformation has taken place in South Korea with the rise in political influence of the younger generation. This trend reflects a shift away from the traditional anti-Communist and pro-US conservatism of the Korean government, which has also been the dominant philosophy of major corporations, the military, and the mass media. “Although [people in their twenties and thirties] do not yet form the core of the new South Korean leadership, the policies of the Roh Moo Hyun government reflect the opinions and views expressed by the younger generation,” political scientist Jung-Hoon Lee writes. “What is seen as the convergence of the perspective of the younger generation and the policy orientation of the government underscores a revolutionary change in the makeup of South Korean society, especially the elite ranks.”28

There is no doubt that the younger generation is in flux, that it is ascending to positions of power, and that its future orientation toward the hobbled system in the North, the ever-growing Chinese giant next door, and the hegemon across the Pacific is unknown. Korean young people lack a fixed identity and certainty of world-view, political ideology, and policy preferences, which sets them apart from their parents and grandparents. The older generation lived in a world where being Korean was a given attribute, where the world was filled with conquerors and conquered, where life and death could be determined at the whim of a powerful landlord, Japanese authority, or Korean dictator. While communism was abhorrent, it was also seductive, and this generation feared that an economically, culturally, and spiritually weak South Korea could easily succumb to the forces of communism. During such times, building the national economy was a moral imperative and cooperation with the United States a moral good.

A small Korean elite of bureaucrats, academics, businessmen, and media both produced and managed this Manichean world-view. The political circle was limited to the chosen few, and most of them shared socioeconomic attributes as well as world-views. Much of this elite had the privilege of education or professional training in the United States and the prestige of English as a facile second language. They were close to elites in Washington, who considered them to be representatives of Korea. Working closely and smoothly with Americans was deemed a requirement for both personal and national success. And successful relationships with Americans in turn advanced their careers.

But with the leftward turn in political leadership under Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun, the old power establishment has been shaken up by new arrivals who are flexing their muscle and trying to consolidate their power. Conservative Koreans readily charge that the “leftist” Roh adminis-
registration is naïve, inexperienced, and unrealistic about the ability of the South to pursue a more independent foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States. They bemoan the generational and ideological shifts taking place in society and blame Roh and the youth for damaging the alliance with the United States and endangering national security. In the context of the Future of Alliance negotiations over the relocation and reduction of troops, Chosun Ilbo declared that the “ruined Korea-US alliance has passed the point that can be covered up by the government’s glossy words.” For the Joong-Ang Ilbo, “only a shadow of our alliance is left” and the reduction “is of great concern because it is going to leave a big hole in our security.”

Yet, the majority of the population do not share the histrionics of the right or the “make friends, not war” wish of the left. Hankyoreh Sinmun, for example, told the nation to take the troop reductions in stride and to look on the positive side:

We urgently need to work for peace and arms reductions on the peninsula. There is even a possibility that the upcoming USFK reduction talks might call for revision of the ROK-US Mutual Defense Treaty, opening the way for a fundamental change in our security environment.

The Chicago Council’s survey reveals a public that is not quick to judge, jump ship, or rock the national security boat: “Surprisingly, given the high level of concern expressed in both South Korea and the United States over recent policy differences, most South Koreans (54 percent) do not think there has been a change in bilateral relations since the inauguration of President Roh Moo Hyun in December 2002.” And the public, in contrast to the political elites, did not react dramatically to the issue of troop reductions.

When told that officials in Washington have proposed reducing the number of US troops in South Korea by about one-third and then asked to choose between saying that this would be good or bad for South Korea’s security, 60 percent think this would be good... while 40 percent say it would be bad.

Moreover, 81 percent of South Koreans support the continued presence of US troops “for a considerable, but not permanent, period of time.”

Realist explanations aside, the changes going on within Korean society – the rise of local governments and residents in national security politics, the prominence of NGOs in all areas of politics, the generational and accompanying identity shifts, and the power struggles between old and new elites – significantly explain the state of flux and uncertainty that the US-Korea alliance is currently undergoing. Put another way, Korean democracy is sending the alliance into a tailspin. How political forces within the US base
areas accept and adapt to the relocation and reduction plans – and how the Korean government integrates or alienates civil society in the context of alliance management – will directly influence the future course of the bilateral alliance. But the possibility of inflicting the single most damaging blow to the alliance lies not with the Koreans but rather with the Americans. It is American unilateralism, in policy and process, which is resented by all Koreans, left, right, and center. Koreans who are exploring the relatively new terrain of democracy know first-hand the negative consequences of unilateralism; they endured it under Japanese colonialism and later under military authoritarianism. These new democrats react intuitively to the imposition of power backed up by the gun. They now have few constraints on how to direct and express that reaction.

The Bush administration is both zealous and sincere about the power of democracy to transform citizens, societies, and polities, as democracy has indeed transformed South Korea. Unfortunately, the Bush administration in its first term has not adjusted very well to democracy in practice. The administration has sought credit for giving birth to democracies, for instance, in Afghanistan and Iraq. But it has not liked the way that new democracies can be unruly, assertive, and quite willing to challenge the power of the United States, interpreting such behavior as disobedient, naïve, and ungrateful. These reactions have in turn fed South Korean skepticism toward US policies. For instance, many South Koreans viewed the Pentagon decision to reposition and reduce US forces on the peninsula as “punishment” for their recent protests against the US troops and foreign policy. The fact that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld blurted out the decision as a done deal caught both Korean conservatives and liberals by surprise and heightened their sense of vulnerability to and resentment of the interests and whims of US policymakers. Consultation with the Korean government on restructuring came after rather than before the fact.

Both the US and South Korean governments have made good attempts to improve the alliance relationship since the strained period of 2002 and early 2003. We have yet to see what kinds of lessons both governments have learned about democracy and foreign policy. The South Korean case teaches us that political processes are just as important as policies and that democracy as a process requires more skill and nuanced management than the projection of policy outcomes. This is a lesson that the Roh administration has been forced to struggle with and one that the second Bush team should heed in Korea as well as elsewhere in the world.

Notes
2 See R.O.K. Presidential Truth Commission on Suspicious Deaths, A Hard Journey to Justice: First Term Report by the Presidential Truth Commission on
5 Ibid., p. 12.
7 For a detailed description of the evolution of and the politics and social interactions in US military camptowns in Korea, see Katharine H.S. Moon, Sex Among Allies, Chapter 1.
8 Republic of Korea National Assembly, Bill # 16102, Migun kongyo chiyok chiwon mit chumin kwon’ikpoho e kwanhan pomyuljan [Legislative bill on support to the USFK regions and protection of the rights and interests of residents]; http://www.assembly.go.kr; accessed 27 March 2003.
12 Samsung Economic Research Institute, CEO Information: Hanguk Sahoe ui gachigwan geupbyeon gwa hondon (Rapid changes in value systems and confusion in Korean society), Seoul, 23 April 2003.
14 Conversation with KHIS organizer, Ilsan, South Korea, Spring 2002.
23 Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Chicago Council on Foreign Affairs, p. 18.

Ibid., p. 20.

Ibid.
When President Bush proclaimed in his 2002 State of the Union speech that North Korea was part of the “axis of evil” along with Iraq and Iran, North Koreans were not the only ones who were enraged. South Koreans were equally angry. Bush’s “evil” epithet needlessly fueled anti-American sentiments already growing in South Korea after a Korean speed-skater was stripped of his gold medal at the 2002 Winter Olympics. Yet at the same time, as a Washington Post article indicated, South Koreans harbored resentment toward Bush’s inapt statement even as they shared the view that “the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Il, is a Stalinist tyrant who starves his people and menaces his neighbors with weapons of mass destruction.”

While the journalist did not speculate on why South Koreans held such “contradictory attitudes” toward North Korea and the United States, an explanation necessarily hinges on the sense of ethnic unity that Koreans share as well as the ability of South Koreans to distinguish between the people of North Korea and Kim Jong Il’s regime.

In the post-Cold War era, ethnic nationalism and conflict have significantly influenced policy considerations in many parts of the world. In particular, the spread of ethnic and national conflict in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has produced deep concerns over the potential danger that ethnic nationalism poses to social stability and political development. Yet most attention has been paid to ethnic conflicts in multi-ethnic states. There is much less understanding of the workings of ethnic nationalism and conflict in a place like Korea where a single ethnic group is divided into two political entities. Bush’s misdirected statement reflects this lack of understanding. Korean nationalism arose as an anti-imperialist ideology that promoted a strong sense of ethnic unity based on shared blood and ancestry. For Koreans, nationalism has been a source of pride and inspiration during much of the modern period. Despite democratization and globalization, ethnic nationalism continues to appeal and continues to shape inter-Korean and US-Korean relations. A sound US policy toward Korea, both North and South, will necessarily be sensitive to these nationalist sentiments.
Roots and forms of Korean nationalism

It is well known that Koreans have developed an organic and collectivist notion of national identity. As in Japan, the Korean nation was “racialized” through belief in a common prehistoric origin, producing an intense sense of collective oneness. While ethnicity is generally regarded as a cultural phenomenon based on a common language and history, and race is understood as a collectivity defined by innate and immutable phenotypic and genotypic characteristics, Koreans have long viewed the two as intertwined. Hence, race has served as a marker that strengthened ethnic identity, which in turn was instrumental in defining the nation. Koreans defined their national identity as “immutable” or “primordial,” based on shared “Korean blood” (hyŏlt’’ong) that is the basis for an ethnically homogeneous and racially distinctive “unitary nation” (tanil minjok). Thus race, ethnicity, and nation were conflated. Indeed, the Korean word minjok, while most widely used for “nation,” can easily refer to “ethnicity” and “race” as well.

In addition, during its formative years, Korean nationalism developed a strong anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist orientation. Nationalism inspired Koreans to create a new, modern nation that could ward off imperialist encroachment at the turn of the twentieth century. Strongly influenced by the Social Darwinism that was then popular in East Asia, Korean intellectuals viewed the political sphere as a struggle between imperialists and nationalists and therefore advocated an energetic nationalism that could withstand rampant imperialist forces. In contrast to nineteenth-century Italy or Germany, where nationalism became an ideology to integrate diverse ethnic groups into a unified political community, nationalism in Korea served anti-imperialist purposes. Given close to a thousand years of political, linguistic, and geographic continuity, any new geographical or political demarcation within Korea was less important than the imperialist menace from outside. Of greater urgency was establishing the Korean nation as a distinctive unit, safeguarding its sovereignty, and promoting national spirit and consciousness.

The need to assert the distinctiveness and purity of the Korean nation grew even more important under colonial rule, especially as Japan attempted to assimilate Koreans into the empire as “imperial subjects.” The Japanese assimilation policy was based on colonial racism, particularly nissen dōsoron, which claimed that Koreans shared a common origin with but were always subordinate to the Japanese. Koreans, however, resisted by asserting their unique racial origins and great national heritage. They stressed that “Koreans are without a doubt a unitary nation (tanil han minjok) in blood and culture.” To question such unity would have been tantamount to denying “Koreanness” in the face of the imperial challenge. Thus, Japanese rule failed to erase Korean national consciousness but rather reinforced the claim to a distinct and homogeneous ethnic identity.

After independence in 1945 and despite the peninsular division into North and South, the unity of the Korean ethnic nation was largely taken for
granted. In 1947, the prominent South Korean historian Son Chint’ae wrote, “Since the beginning of history, we [Koreans] have been a single race that has had a common historic life, living in a single territory... sharing a common destiny.”4 Similarly, North Korean historian Paek Namun noted in 1946 that “[t]he Korean nation is a unitary nation with a common blood, territory, language, culture, and historical destiny for thousands of years.”5 Neither side disputed the ethnic homogeneity of the Korean nation, which spanned thousands of years and was based on a single bloodline of the great han race.6 More recently, in the early 1990s, North Korea announced the discovery of the tomb of Tan’gun, mythic founder of the Korean nation, and some South Koreans sought to erect an honorary Tan’gun statue in every government office building. In short, despite territorial division, ethnic homogeneity was assumed on both sides.

Recent surveys confirm that belief in common blood and ancestry are still defining features of the Korean nation. As presented in Table 3.1, a survey conducted in South Korea from October to December 2000 shows that 93 percent of respondents “strongly agree” or “agree” that “our nation

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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree or agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our nation has a single blood line</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despite foreign citizenship, people belong to the same ethnic nation insofar as they share the same ancestry</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korean people are of the same Korean ethnic nation</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Degree of attachment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly agree or agree (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Korean descendants in Japan vs. Japanese in Korea</td>
<td>62 vs. 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koreans descendants in US vs. Americans in Korea</td>
<td>63 vs. 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Blood” as the single most important criterion of national identity</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koreans are brothers and sisters, regardless of residence or ideology</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Survey of “nation identity and unification” conducted by the authors (October/November 2000); Survey of the “formation of Korean network community in the 21st century” conducted by KBS and Hallym University (December 1999).
has a single blood line,” and 83 percent feel that Korean descendants living abroad, even if legal citizens of a foreign country, still belong to the han race because of shared ancestry. In addition, 95 percent of respondents “strongly agree” or “agree” that “North Korean people are of the same Korean ethnic-nation.” As a result, the majority feel more affinity with Korean descendants overseas than with foreigners living in Korea (62 percent for Korean descendants in Japan versus 18 percent for Japanese in Korea, and 63 percent for descendants in the United States versus 17 percent for Americans in Korea). Similarly, another survey conducted in South Korea in December 1999 finds that 66 percent of the respondents consider “blood” the most important criterion for defining the Korean nation and 75 percent agree that “Koreans are all brothers and sisters regardless of residence or ideology.” All these findings clearly indicate that Koreans still maintain a strong organic and racialized conception of nation based on common ancestry and ethnic homogeneity.

Nationalism in the two Koreas

In contrast to Germany, where a similarly strong ethnic nationalism was discredited by association with Nazism, nationalism became a highly effective political resource in postcolonial Korea. Both North and South Korean leaders, appealing to this nationalist ethos, effectively killed a trusteeship plan proposed by the United States, Soviet Union, and Britain in 1945. North Korea intentionally avoided using the term nationalism (minjok chuŭi), which Marxism treated as an ideology of the bourgeoisie, and preferred to use “patriotism” (aeguk chuŭi). Yet North Korea was undoubtedly nationalist in its rhetoric and policy. Its leader, Kim Il Sung, went so far as to say that he was pursuing not a communist revolution but rather a nationalist program. He believed it was premature to seek a communist society in Korea as he would not be able to garner enough popular support. Instead, he claimed, Korea must first accomplish “a democratic revolution to remove colonial and feudal elements” through the promotion of “patriotism that hates the enemy and loves the fatherland.”7 For him, “there is no point to have ‘-ism’ or ideology without minjok and fatherland” and “authentic communists should be patriots who enthusiastically love their nation and fatherland.”8

Similarly, South Korean leaders like Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee extensively used nationalist rhetoric. The southern regime was named Taehan min’guk or the Republic of the Great Han Race and the Tan’gun myth became an indispensable national symbol as illustrated by the adoption of Tan’gi or the Tan’gun calendar. Kaech’ŏnjŏl or the anniversary of Tan’gun’s accession was designated as a national holiday to celebrate the birth of the Korean nation or race. Syngman Rhee, the first president of the Republic of Korea, proposed ilmin chuŭi (One People-ism, an ideology of one people) as the “state policy (kuksi) of a new nation.” Ilmin nationalism
became a basis for his claim to represent the entire (ethnic) Korean nation and his “theory of unification through the northern advance” (pukchint’ongilnon). Park Chung Hee, too, despite his denunciation of Rhee’s legacy, continued to appeal to the ethos of Korean nationalism. He mobilized nationalism for his modernization program by stressing the unity and eternal nature of the “great han race.”

While leaders in both Koreas appealed to nationalism in post-colonial state-building, the sense of ethnic unity did not sit well with the unexpected and artificial territorial division. Of particular importance in understanding inter-Korean relations is this uneasy juxtaposition of the unified ethnic base of the Korean nation and contention over its proper political form. Kim Il Sung claimed that “[o]ur people have lived as a homogeneous nation in the same land for thousands of years. They have spoken and written one language, and their history and cultural traditions are the same. Our country has no national minority.”9 Besides, he continued, Koreans should be “proud of keeping the national spirit... [and] national purity, despite Japanese attempts to destroy it with aggressive assimilation policy during colonial rule.”10 For Kim, all Koreans belonged to the same ethnic nation, notwithstanding a small fraction of “national traitors” who surrendered the nation to imperialist forces. Likewise, in building a new nation, Rhee preached the timeless homogeneity of the Korean people and nation as well as utilizing the symbolic sentiments of family and organic body. His ilmin chuši proclaimed that “[a]s a unitary nation (tanil minjok) that has a long history, we are always one and not two. As one nation, we have to be one always.”11 Park Chung Hee, too, proclaimed that “[a]lthough we are now separated into south and north, we are one entity with a common destiny, bound by one language, and by one history and by the same racial origin. Ideology changes, but the nation stays and lasts.”12 By “we,” Park meant neither of the two Koreas but an essential, ethnically homogeneous Korean nation at their root, which was split by “national traitors” as well as global politics.

Thus, both Koreas shared a commitment to the ethnic base of the Korean nation, originating in historical homogeneity and greatness and reinforced by the demand for national unification. Neither territorial partition nor political separation lessened the shared sense of ethnic unity but rather preserved and enhanced it as each side regarded the division as temporary; to admit otherwise would result in the loss of political legitimacy. However, as the subject turns to the political base of the Korean nation, major differences in approach begin to appear.

As scholars of nationalism have demonstrated, nation as a concept contains two elements: ethnic/cultural and civic/political/territorial.13 During colonial rule, as discussed above, Korean leaders stressed the former in their understanding of the Korean nation. As both Koreas were seeking to establish their own sovereign states, they needed to attach a certain political criterion of membership to their respective regimes. Although all
Koreans belonged to the same ethnic nation, not all of them were qualified to be legitimate members of a new political community. Some had betrayed Korea by selling out to foreign powers. Each regime had to identify a certain political base to build a new Korea free of such anti-national elements. For this purpose, contrasting criteria were applied: anti-colonialism or anti-imperialism for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and anti-communism for the Republic of Korea (ROK).

For North Korea, anti-colonialism or anti-imperialism became the basis for a new Korean community, and only the DPRK, which was fighting against colonial and imperialist forces, could and should claim national legitimacy. The South was seen as no more than a puppet regime beholden to American imperialists after 1945 and, prior to that, to the Japanese colonial regime, and thus it had no claim to legitimacy. On the other hand, the South claimed that the northern regime was merely one of the many post-World War II satellite communist states dependent on the Soviet Union, with neither political independence nor a legitimate claim to represent the Korean ethnic whole.

The political notions of nation held by Rhee, Park, and Kim illustrate a principle of mutual exclusion that is contested despite a shared sense of ethnic unity. It is no coincidence that the criteria set by each side were based on anti-foreign sentiments, whether anti-American or anti-communist, reflecting the anti-imperialist roots of Korean nationalism. Each side claimed that it was the only legitimate central government, chungang chŏngbu, which represented the entire (ethnic) Korean nation, relegating the other simply to the status of a lost territory to be recovered.14

**Nationalism in inter-Korean relations**

Conventional wisdom among scholars of ethnic nationalism holds that ethnic cleavages are more fundamental and permanent than political ones, implying that ethnic unity – the absence of ethnic division – would and should function as a unifying force in a divided nation.15 Given the strength attributed to ethnic affiliations, therefore, ethnic nationalism ought to properly function as an integrative force in Korea, since Koreans, despite territorial division, believe that they belong to the same race and that their nation will be eventually unified. Contrary to this conventional wisdom, however, ethnic unity – or, more precisely, the perception of ethnic homogeneity – has not produced peaceful co-existence between the two Koreas but instead intense conflict and tension lasting more than half a century. Why and how did this strong faith in ethnic unity produce such intense conflict?

Largely drawn from studies of multi-ethnic states, current theories of ethnic nationalism are not very useful in answering this question. More pertinent are the insights of Social Identity Theory.16 Social psychologists have generally maintained that individuals, so as to highlight their own positive and distinctive traits, show a favorable bias toward in-group members.
compared to out-group members. Recently, however, a number of scholars have begun to emphasize the more complex functions of in-group favoritism. For instance, Marques et al. argue that “judgments about both likable and unlikable in-group members are more extreme than judgments about out-group members.”\(^{17}\) According to their study, in-group favoritism, a fairly commonsensical consequence of group identification and inter-group contest, extends not only to “an in-group bias for desirable members” but to an “in-group derogation for undesirable members . . . [where] downgrading unlikable in-groupers may be a cognitive strategy aimed at preserving the group’s sense of positivity as a whole.”\(^{18}\) In this extension of Social Identity Theory, the in-group is more extremely evaluated for both likeable and unlikable traits (in-group favoritism and in-group derogation). The more negative judgment of in-group members is termed the Black Sheep Effect.\(^{19}\)

If we view ethnicity and nationality as forms of social identification, this theoretical insight into the process by which extremely negative in-group judgments produce a black sheep effect can help illuminate inter-Korean national conflict. When the behaviors of undesirable in-group members are perceived to threaten in-group identity, the black sheep effect can be activated to preserve or restore the perceived positivity of the in-group as a whole. This occurs when the pressure to maintain a coherent group identity in the face of external challenges actually results in internal pressures to conform that are themselves divisive. Intra-group conflict is more intractable since the in-group is the very place where identity must be preserved, allowing for the efficient functioning of the group in relation to competitive groups.

Accordingly, a shared sense of ethnic unity is likely to produce strong pressure for in-group homogeneity and conformity to an essentialized identity like the abstract notion of “Koreanness.” This is because such an (imagined) unity increases expectations for all members to conform to certain shared norms or customs. However, the reality of territorial division, with its diverse array of powerful, international others, prevents the fulfillment of the ethnic ideal, and consequent political/ideological cleavages threaten the unity of that ethnic identity. This in turn triggers a process of selective in-group derogation and policing of conformity. This can be done in the name of purifying the ethnic community by cleansing foreign ideas and thoughts seen to contaminate or betray the community. Here we see the potential for the activation of the black sheep effect in nationalist politics as North and South view each other as a profound threat to in-group (ethnic) homogeneity. Determining who will define and represent the ethnic nation becomes hotly contested. This intra-ethnic conflict is bitter and persistent because each side is wedded to a vision of ethnic unity in which the greatest threat to the collective identity is not out-group members but internal “traitors” (unlikable in-group members, i.e., Kim and his communist followers from the South Korean perspective; Rhee, Park, and their
supporters from the North Korean perspective). Thus, the highly compelling commitment to the ethnic nation, rather than functioning as a unifying force, has intensified inter-Korean conflict over the past half-century.

While nationalism produced a contentious politics of representation between the two Koreas, it has been and is still considered a crucial resource in the future reunification process. As b.C. Koh aptly points out in comparing the unification proposals of North and South, “Both plans recognize not only the pressing necessity of reunification but also its ultimate inevitability” based on the premise of ethnic unity. In particular, the South Korean plan advocates, after an interim stage, a single unified nation-state as a Korean Commonwealth. According to this plan, the “unification of North and South ultimately would have to be based on nationalism of the han race . . . [because] nationalism is not only an ideology that prescribes lives of each individual of the han race but a guide in planning for unification and glory.”

The North is not much different in its view of nationalism as a force for unification. Although Koreans live under different political systems with different ideologies, Kim Il Sung claimed that there can be no contradictions between them as far as the reunification question is concerned. Kim, noting that countries consisting of people from diverse ethnic and national groups fight in concert for a common goal, asked, “why can’t our people of one and the same descent and nation join hands in the bid for national reunification . . . ? We do not antagonize our southern fellows nor do we seek to enforce our ideology and social system on them.” Similarly, in a 1998 speech entitled “Let Us Reunify the Country Independently and Peacefully Through the Great Unity of the Entire Nation,” Kim Jong Il proclaimed:

No force can ever split into two forever the single Korean nation that has been formed and developed through a long history, nor can it obliterate our nation and our national traits. The present division of our nation into north and south is a temporary misfortune and . . . the reunion of our nation that has been divided by foreign forces is an inevitable trend of our nation’s history.

Scholars such as Chŏng Yŏnghun regard the recent promotion of “Tan’gun nationalism” by the North as indicative of the common ground between the two Koreas and therefore auspicious for unification. However, the utility of ethnic nationalism in the process of unification is more complex. Scholars have warned that a strong sense of ethnic homogeneity may obscure real differences between the two Koreas and thus can lead Koreans to overlook the practical problems associated with unification. In Korea and Its Futures, for instance, anthropologist Roy Richard Grinker claims that, because of a belief in ethnic unity, Koreans understand unification as a sacred, universally desired goal and the recovery of a pre-divided
Because this understanding of unification obscures North–South differences developed since 1945, it can prevent Koreans from taking the practical steps necessary to unify the nation. Belief in ethnic homogeneity can thus impede, rather than facilitate, unification because it cannot “accommodate a changed and heterogeneous Korea.”

Others argue that unification really means the hegemonic domination of the southern system over the North, making the unification process divisive and conflict-ridden. The German intellectual Jürgen Habermas, for instance, has warned South Koreans against taking ethnic consciousness for granted in the process of unification. Referring to the German experience of “unification by absorption,” he reminds Koreans that West Germany’s hegemonic unification relied too much on ethnic consciousness and unity, while paying too little attention to the need for political clarification on the part of citizens of different backgrounds. Habermas urges Koreans to learn from German reunification and warns that an alleged shared sense of ethnic unity can portend a dangerous fast-track unification by absorption. Thus, while ethnic nationalism can be a resource in the unification process, one must likewise understand its complex nature and function to avoid its potentially harmful effects.

Nationalism and US-Korean relations

Nationalism – and particularly the Korean sense of ethnic unity and pride in national history – have also shaped relations between both North and South Korea and the United States over the past half-century. North Korean nationalism, as discussed above, is built on the resentment of foreign powers, especially Japan and the United States, and presents juch’é or self-reliance as a supreme goal. In juch’é ideology, the regime is framed as a nationalist entity fighting against imperialist forces to unify the broken community of the Korean nation. North Koreans are challenged by questions like: “How can our nation which has a long history and time-honored culture put up with US imperialist colonial rule and tolerate national humiliation and persecution . . . ?”

North Koreans have been urged to participate in “fighting against imperialism” to uphold their strong anti-imperialist tradition, in contrast to the South, which has remained a semi-colony under a new imperialism imposed by America. From this perspective, even the civil war of 1950–53, with its devastating consequences, could be justified as a nationalist effort to liberate fellow Koreans in the South from American imperialism and the southern puppet regime. Also, such a view of the unbalanced state of US-ROK relations (i.e., the South as an American puppet state) explains why Pyongyang has insisted on direct, bilateral relations and negotiations with Washington. For the North, bilateral relations with the United States signifies equality in status and, consequently, national pride.

In recent years, faced with a precarious international environment after the collapse of the Soviet empire and the confrontation with the United
States over nuclear issues, North Korea further stressed the value of ethnic/racial nationalism through such phrases as the “Chosó minjok cheil chuûi” (Theory of the Korean Nation as Number One) and “urisik sahoe chuuˇi” (Our Style of Socialism). Just as the Sino-Soviet dispute contributed to the emergence of juch’e ideology, so did the collapse of the Soviet empire influence the rise of these more contemporary ideological variations. Both are very defensive expressions of nationalism. The “Theory of the Korean Nation” is highly critical of the Chinese open-door policy and the Soviet policies of glasnost and perestroika, judging them to be compromises with the capitalist world system. North Korean ideologists also claim that Eastern Europe failed because it merely “imitated the Soviet experience in a mechanical manner.” The call for “our style of socialism” attempts, in an increasingly precarious international environment, to avoid the fate of European communism. It was also in this context that North Korea aggressively promoted its national tradition and heritage in the 1990s. In addition to resurrecting the Tan’gun myth, the North reevaluated Confucianism, which it had once condemned as the ideology of reactionary feudalism, as a possible political ethic that could support juch’e ideology. Today, it is difficult to find traces of the intellectual legacy of Marxism-Leninism in North Korea. Instead, the northern regime stresses the importance of Korean blood and soul. This invocation of national sentiments and traits recalls earlier Korean nationalists who sought to defend Korea against foreign aggression.

In many ways, North Korea today seems to face a situation similar to what pre-modern Chosó Korea faced a century ago, i.e., national survival in a hostile international environment. North Korea has been largely independent from the Soviet empire since the 1960s, which is why it still survives even after the latter’s collapse. The North has a deep suspicion of superpowers, including China and Russia, and is very critical of their open-door policies. For the North, therefore, acquisition of nuclear weapons is crucial to obtaining both security assurance and due respect from foreign powers. This kind of “nuclear nationalism” has been behind its diplomacy of brinkmanship. At the same time, the militant nationalism of juch’e has become a liability in North Korea’s efforts to reform its economy. Rather than instigating economic reform and opening the country to the outside world, as China did two decades ago, North Korea has resorted to a highly chauvinistic and defensive form of nationalism. It has chosen to remain a “hermit kingdom.” The North seems unlikely to change its course despite recent measures of reform; it will continue to promote a defensive form of nationalism as a key strategy of national survival.

The South has been situated much differently. After 1945 it was immediately incorporated into the US-led capitalist world system and normalized its relations with Japan two decades later. The United States fought with South Koreans against North Korean and Chinese communists in the Korea War (1950–53) and assisted the South to take off economically, making it “Asia’s
next giant” by the late 1980s. As Gregory Henderson, a well-known Korean observer, points out, “we [Americans] were more than a friend to Seoul, we were the friend... anti-Americanism was about as common in South Korea as fish in trees.” However, alleged US involvement in the May 1980 uprisings in the city of Kwangju and support of the autocratic Chun Doo Hwan regime crucially shaped the subsequent development of anti-American nationalism. As dissident leaders reflected on why they had failed to prevent such a tragedy in Kwangju, they began to question their position vis-à-vis the United States and reevaluated previous strategies that sought American support for their democratic movements. Many were increasingly endorsing a position that Korean democratization could not be obtained without national liberation from American hegemony. As Tim Shorrock points out, the Korean democratic movement began to change from “a Western-oriented movement based largely on middle-class resentment of Park Chung Hee’s military dictatorship” to “a nationalist struggle for independence from foreign intervention and eventual unification” in the 1980s. The democracy movement became a struggle against the US-supported authoritarian regimes in South Korea.

Anti-American sentiments were more than harmless emotional appeals and translated into some radical actions. From 23 to 25 May 1985, 73 students occupied the US Information Center in Seoul, demanding a formal US apology for “its role in the Kwangju massacre”; on 12 August, five students unsuccessfully sought to invade the US Embassy for the same reason; and on 4 November, 14 students occupied the US Chamber of Commerce office in Seoul, protesting reported US pressure to increase agricultural imports to Korea. Anti-American sentiments, however, were not confined to student activists and gradually spread to the populace. A survey taken in June 1990 shows that more than one-third (37.2 percent) of the respondents supported anti-American movements and more than two-thirds (72.7 percent) agreed that “anti-American sentiments in Korea are serious.” The support for anti-American movements was most evident among those in their twenties (56.5 percent), college students (63.4 percent), the educated (45.3 percent), the new middle class (42.9 percent), workers (45.1 percent), and people in the Cholla region (46.3 percent) where the Kwangju uprisings erupted.

During the democratization process of the 1990s, however, anti-American movements gradually declined, with the exception of several important incidents such as the protests surrounding the 1997 economic crisis. A 1994 Gallup survey among South Koreans found that 64 percent of the respondents viewed the United States favorably. Also, anti-government, pro-democracy movements were transformed into more moderate civil society movements (simin sahoe undong). These civil society groups, which represent the diversification of the social movement sector, address a host of topics that were neglected during the struggle for democracy such as environmentalism, migrant workers’ rights, and gay-lesbian-bisexual rights.
Still, the Korean politics of national identity has not disappeared. With improved relations with North Korea, stronger economic power, and enhanced international status, South Koreans are once again redefining their identity vis-à-vis the North and the United States. In the last Korean presidential election held in December 2002, anti-American slogans and protests filled the streets while some candidates suffered because of their pro-American image. Polls in South Korea revealed more critical attitudes toward America than in any other Asian country, including Vietnam and Indonesia. Unlike the past, when opposition leaders led the politics of national identity, today the leading advocates are in government.

A Gallup survey conducted in February 2002 shows that only one-third of the respondents view the United States favorably and 60 percent view the United States unfavorably – a radical change from the 1994 survey. Unlike the 1980s, when perceptions of US economic and political dominance fueled anti-American sentiments, today’s resentment largely stems from a belief that the United States somehow is impeding Korea’s pursuit of national interests. As evidence, Koreans refer to recent incidents such as Bush’s characterization of North Korea as part of the “axis of evil,” US pressure on South Korea to buy F-15 jet fighters that the Pentagon itself plans to stop using, and the killing of two Korean girls by an American military vehicle whose occupants were subsequently acquitted by a US military tribunal. A 2002 poll shows that 62 percent of South Koreans consider Bush’s “axis of evil” comment as “an excessive statement to escalate tensions in the Korean peninsula,” and only 31 percent regard it as “a proper statement to indicate the North Korean threat.” Anti-Americanism remains, as in the past, stronger among young, educated, white-collar Koreans. A recent study by the Rand Corporation confirms these findings by not only showing a decline in favorable attitudes toward the United States but also identifying historical and structural causes that underlie the more immediate/emotional responses to the above events.

Deeper roots indeed sustain the recent anti-American movements. In particular, the recent spike in anti-American organizing has much to do with the rise of a new nationalism that in turn reflects a shift in South Korean views toward North Korea and the United States. First is the recent change in inter-Korea relations, especially after the June 2000 Summit meeting between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il. The Summit and the prolonged pursuit of the “sunshine policy” have had a lasting psychological effect. Many South Koreans, particularly members of the younger generation, no longer regard the North as a looming threat to South Korea’s existence. Instead, North Korea has become an object of pity and compassion. Under these circumstances, fewer South Koreans worry about American abandonment. Instead, South Koreans fear “entrapment” in a US-North Korean war, which could incinerate the South Korean capital. If North Korea no longer frightens South Koreans, American troops are less valued as a deterrent. At best, they are an unnecessary inconvenience. At worst, they infringe on South Korean sovereignty, interfere in its politics, and are more likely to provoke war than prevent it.
In addition, a new generation of political leaders who led the anti-American movements during Korea’s fight for democracy in the 1980s has now risen to positions of prominence. These leaders perceive the US-ROK alliance to be one-sided and unequal. They possess greater pride and self-confidence in their nation and seek to redefine their relations with the United States to reflect South Korea’s status as a significant industrial power and a stable participatory democracy. Many Koreans believe that the United States still behaves like a hegemonic power, insensitive to South Korean sovereignty and determined to impose America’s national interests on the peninsula. They find the politics of national identity appealing. While South Korean “progressives” treat the North as part of the Korean ethnic community, many question the role of the United States and whether its policies are fully compatible with South Korea’s national interests. They are particularly unhappy with the Bush administration’s policy toward North Korea. Unlike the United States, which takes a regional and global approach toward the nuclear issue by focusing on nuclear proliferation in the region and political links between the North’s nuclear program and global terrorism, South Korea is more concerned with the prospect of instability on the Korean peninsula. Some South Koreans even view the United States as a threat to their national security that is equal to, or even greater than that posed by the North. Unlike the past, when the government largely supported US involvement in peninsular affairs, those harboring the deepest misgivings are members of the current South Korean government.

Most recently, as a reaction to US dominance in Korea, some Korean leaders have turned to China as a more important ally of Korea. This new movement largely reflects the rise of China as well as Korea’s discomfort with US hegemony. China is now the biggest market for South Korean exports and the favored destination for its investment (replacing the United States). Korean students represent the largest proportion of the rapidly increasing group of foreign students in China. In addition, China has played a leadership role in dealing with the North Korean issue, and some South Koreans even regard reliance on China as an alternative to security dependence on the United States. A survey of the newly elected members of the National Assembly taken right after the April 15 election of 2004 attests to this belief: 50 percent of the ruling Uri Party members list China as Korea’s most important ally while only 42 percent refer to the United States. Koreans are reluctant to accept Japanese leadership in a new East Asian regional order, largely due to the historical legacy of colonial rule. They seem more willing to embrace China as a new regional leader even though South Korea fought the Chinese army during the Korean War.

It is in this context that the current Roh Moo Hyun government is seeking to make Korea a hub of the Northeast Asian economy in a rapidly changing regional and global order. Proclaiming the current period as an era of Northeast Asia (tongpuk a sidae), Roh wants the ROK to participate actively in the new era by making such a hub into an engine for regional
integration. Yet what the current government is pursuing is more than economic integration among Asian nations. This new regionalist outlook signifies Korea’s new politics of identity as it seeks to reorient Korea’s past dependence on the United States toward a more balanced national strategy within a new international environment. In essence, it reflects a changing regional order, especially the rise of China and Korea’s discontent with American approaches to globalization and unilateralism.

This Asianism can be understood as “a new strategy for the Korean peninsula” that can include the North, which has been left out of globalization processes. A report by South Korea’s Presidential Commission on Policy Planning defines this recent Asianism as “a new perspective of history and world-view” with the ultimate goal of forming an “Asian Union” that would include the North. Unlike in the past, recent pan-Asianism originates with a group of progressive scholars and intellectuals who currently serve the Roh government. It is also being promoted as a new strategy for the entire Korean peninsula in contrast to US-led globalization that excludes North Korea. Treating the North as part of Korea’s ethnic identity, this group of pan-Asianists questions whether US policies are compatible with South Korea’s national interests. Above all, they aspire to shift from a Korea that is focused on the United States to one focused on Asia, inclusive of both China and North Korea. They seek, to use André Gunder Frank’s phrase, to “reorient” Korea, and nationalism is behind their new strategy.

Implications and suggestions

Koreans, both North and South, still maintain a strong sense of ethnic unity and pride in their nation. They also find the anti-imperialist rhetoric in their nationalism appealing. The anti-imperialist nationalist sentiment is even more pronounced in North Korea, which stresses the importance of ethnic identity in the struggle for national survival. Once again, despite different political systems, both North and South Korea still prioritize ethnic identity and nationalism. Thus, understanding the workings of Korean nationalism, in both North and South, is critical for comprehending and improving inter-Korean and Korean-US relations.

If the dangerous divisions of the Korean peninsula are to be peacefully resolved, both Koreas will need to cultivate a more civic notion of nation. Although ethnic nationalism served well as an ideology of anti-colonial racism, since 1945 it has led ironically to a contentious politics of national representation between the two sides. Also, unification efforts based solely on the precondition of ethnic homogeneity and nationalism can be politically dangerous. While it could serve as an initial impetus toward unification, a shared ethnic identity alone, as the German unification experience shows, will not necessarily prevent North Koreans from becoming “second-class citizens” in a unified Korea. Even worse, due to higher expectations coming from a shared sense of ethnic unity, a disjuncture between identity (ethnic
homogeneity) and practice (second class citizens) will add more confusion and tension to the unification process. If this is the case, Koreans need to formulate a more democratic national identity rather than appeal to the sort of ethnic nationalism that preaches a false sense of uniformity only realizable through enforced conformity and a violent process of exclusion.\footnote{Put differently, Koreans should envision a society in which they can live together not simply because they are ethnically one but because they are equal citizens of a democratic polity. It would be premature to push for reunification until Koreans can formulate this sort of democratic national identity.}

This important task of new identity formation, however, cannot be expected from either of the two governments. This important mission belongs instead to the social movement sector. It is encouraging to see today that some civic social groups in the South are working to protect and promote the rights of North Korean refugees and foreign migrant workers. The task will be all the more important and urgent as Korea becomes more democratic, globalizes, and also prepares for national unification. To be sure, it is much more difficult to expect a similar change in North Korea, which has no comparable civil society. Yet, a lessened sense of outside threat, especially from the United States, would help North Korea move away from a defensive, chauvinistic form of ethnic nationalism. As scholars of nationalism show, particularistic ethnic factors tend to overshadow civic elements in times of crisis such as emigration, foreign wars, and terrorism.\footnote{North Korea, as discussed above, has also promoted an organic sense of nation, privileging the collective interests of the nation over the individual, as a defensive strategy of national survival against foreign imperialism. To lessen such authoritarian collectivism, the United States and Japan as well as South Korea need to engage North Korea, facilitating economic ties and providing security guarantees, so that the isolated regime can be more open to the outside world. Only when North Korea becomes a “normal” nation through the normalization of relations with the United States and Japan, which would reduce its anxiety over national survival, will there be a chance (however remote) that it will become a more civic, democratic society. The threat of regime change or military strike will only justify and strengthen a militant, defensive, xenophobic form of nationalism at the expense of civic and human rights in North Korea. For this reason, the recently passed North Korean Human Rights Act, which North Korea sees as a threat to its regime, is unlikely to achieve its professed objectives.}

In addition, policy-makers in the South and the United States need to understand the unique features of Korean nationalism outlined above. In particular, they need to attend to the fact that South Koreans distinguish the people (ethnic nation) from the state/regime in their understanding of the North. It was precisely for this reason that many South Koreans were angered by the “axis of evil” speech while simultaneously regarding Kim Jong Il as a Stalinist tyrant. In other words, precisely because of the shared sense of ethnic unity and the contested nature of the political notion of the Korean nation,
many South Koreans see North Korean people as brothers and sisters sharing the same blood line and at the same time victims of the communist regime that betrayed the Korean national community. Also, it is for this reason that South Korean government programs perceived as helping northern siblings in need garner public support, but not programs that buttress the northern regime. In the past, the southern government has often failed to recognize this distinction and consequently has generated inconsistent support for its northern policies. It is important, therefore, for the South Korean government to prioritize the people of North Korea in the framing of engagement policy. The same can be said for US policy toward North Korea. The United States needs to prioritize the people as opposed to the regime, giving preference to humanitarian aid over other security issues. A policy that accepts the legitimacy of South Korean nationalist sentiments would also help to reduce the anti-American resentment of South Koreans and thus improve US-ROK relations.

In conclusion, the United States should take indigenous nationalism into consideration when fashioning a better foreign policy, and this applies particularly to its Korea policy. History shows that the United States had a far better record in foreign relations when doing so. For instance, in the occupation of Japan, the United States accommodated Japanese Shinto nationalism (i.e., keeping imperial institutions), mobilizing it as a source of inspiration and solidarity for the Japanese in their recovery from the humiliation and destruction of war. In South Korea, on the other hand, the United States mistakenly interpreted nationalism as communism and severely suppressed it. The United States should not repeat the same mistake it made half a century ago when it came to Korea to “liberate” the nation but underestimated the significance of rising nationalism.

In the South, despite democratization and globalization, nationalism has not disappeared. On the contrary, the politics of national identity still appeal to many South Koreans. With the changing regional and global order – the end of the Cold War, American unilateralism, the rise of China – South Koreans are struggling again to reposition themselves vis-à-vis the United States, China, and Japan, as well as the North. Many Koreans do not necessarily support “anti-”American policies but rather advocate becoming an equal partner with the United States. The United States also must recognize that nationalism, not communism, is the guiding principle for North Korea. North Koreans are very proud of their nation, despite economic and other problems. They are promoting “nuclear nationalism” to gain respect from other nations, especially the United States, as well as using the nuclear threat as a military deterrent. Labeling North Korea a rogue state or part of an “axis of evil” only hurts its national pride, increases its anxiety about national survival, and pushes it into a corner. Any US policy that does not consider these nationalist sentiments will only fail. The result will be that South Korea will continue to turn away from the United States and perhaps move toward China, and North Korea will become more chauvinistic and xenophobic, thus further reducing the probability of constructive dialogue.
Notes
4 Cited in Duncan, op. cit.
11 Rhee Syngman, “Ilmin chuŭi ran muŏt?” (What is One People-ism?), Chubo 3, 1949, pp. 2–5.
13 For example, see Anthony Smith, National Identity, Reno, NE: University of Nevada Press, 1991.
14 A survey taken in 2002 shows that 91.72 percent of the respondents call the northern part of the peninsula “pukhan” (the northern part of the han race), while 74.48 percent call the southern part “taehan minjuk” (Republic of Korea).
15 For instance, Connor asserts that when the loyalty to the ethnic group and the loyalty to the state are “perceived as being in irreconcilable conflict,” political loyalties generally succumb because they “cannot muster the [same] level of emotional commitment” as ethnic identities. See Walker Connor, Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, p. 208.
16 A gap exists between the fields of social psychology and nationalism studies, especially in terms of the level of analysis. Where studies of ethnicity and nationalism, often taking a socio-historical perspective, assume the saliency of relatively large and complex social groups, experimental social psychology generally limits itself to local “naturally occurring groups” or, more often, to experimentally isolated groups with minimized internal differentiation and contestation. Nonetheless, the nation and ethnie, as forms of “imagined community,” fulfill the basic requirements for perceived group identity in Tajfel and


26 Ibid., p. 258.


30 In April 1992 the North removed Marxism-Leninism when it revised the constitution, officially becoming a nationalist state.

31 In his dissertation entitled “Wounded Nationalism,” Han Hongkoo attributes Kim’s distrust of superpowers to his bitter experience with international socialism in Manchuria in the 1930s. In February 1932, shortly after the Japanese takeover of Manchuria, a pro-Japanese Korean group residing in Manchuria organized the Minsaengdan (People’s Livelihood Corps), also known as the MSD. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), however, wrongly suspected that its own Korean CCP
members (who had become part of the CCP according to the Comintern principle of “one party in one country”) were affiliated with the MSD and led a purge of alleged MSD members. It was estimated that the CCP killed anywhere between 500 and 2,000 Korean communists and sympathizers in a two and a half-year period. Kim himself was arrested by the CCP as an MSD suspect and was said to have been “only a hair’s breath away from execution” (ibid., pp. 16–17). The MSD purge left important legacies for North Korea, one being Kim’s obsession with national independence and distrust of superpowers and international socialism. This explains why Kim distanced himself from both sides and maintained an independent position during the turbulent Sino-Soviet dispute. As Han points out, “Kim’s experiences enlightened him to the political behavior of the two self-acclaimed big brothers of the communist camp that had sacrificed the revolution of small countries for the sake of their own national interest.” See Hongkoo Han, “Wounded Nationalism: The Min saengdan Incident and Kim Il Sung in Eastern Manchuria,” unpublished thesis, Seattle: University of Washington, 1999, p. 356. See also Chapter 4 in Gi-Wook Shin, Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006.

37 Ch’oe Wŏnsik, “Ch’ŏnha sambunjigye rosŏůi tongasiaron” (A Theory of East Asia as a Tripartite of the World), in Dongbuga kongdongch’e uĭ haynhayŏ (Toward a North-east Asian Community), Seoul: Donga ilbosa, 2004, p. 19.
39 Ibid.
40 Indeed, scholars have made salient the variations within the Korean ethnic community that a belief in homogeneity can obscure. See, for example, Jung-Sun Park and Paul Y. Chang, “Contestation in the Formation of National and Ethnic Identities in Global Context: The Case of the Overseas Korean Act,” paper presented at the Conference on Korean Identity, Institute of Korean Studies, Yonseu University, 28–29 October 2004.
North Korea remains one of the most militarized countries in the world today, with over a million military personnel – at least 12 percent of the male population. Its military is commonly estimated to consume as much as 25 percent of the national budget. Recently Kim Jong Il, who runs the country as chairman of the all-powerful National Defense Council, made the “military-first policy” the supreme guiding principle for his rule. Not only is North Korea highly militarized but it also maintains a threatening posture with two-thirds of its ground forces and a significant amount of logistical support concentrated in the forward area between Pyongyang and the demilitarized zone (DMZ), ready to strike with little warning.

It is therefore hardly surprising that South Korea is vigilant about the possibility of a surprise attack from the North. Such an attack could turn Seoul, South Korea’s capital with over 10 million residents, almost instantaneously into “a sea of fire.” Nor is it surprising that Washington and Tokyo also suspect an increasing threat from Pyongyang’s continuing programs to develop weapons of mass destruction and long-range missiles. A little disheartening, and even counterproductive, however, is the thoroughness with which policy-makers in Seoul and Washington ignore or dismiss Pyongyang’s legitimate security concerns, as if North Korea were not threatened by outside military forces.

Not only does the South have sufficient military capability, without American military support, to stop and defeat North Korea’s blitzkrieg attempt, but it also leads the North in important categories of military power. Faced with this increasingly unfavorable balance of power, Pyongyang seems to have turned to asymmetrical power advantages that would give it the ability to deter an attack. On balance, the military situation on the Korean peninsula may be characterized as an asymmetric balance between the South’s conventional power superiority and the North’s asymmetric power advantage (derived largely from its long-range artillery and weapon of mass destruction (WMDs)), leading to a “balance of terror” that sustains the current armistice. Such a state is inherently unstable. A small incident, accidental or not, could trigger a chain of events that would unleash the destructive power each holds over the other, resulting in mutual assured destruction.
Asymmetric balance of terror

Despite the official position of the South Korean and US governments that the South is inferior to the North in terms of aggregate military power, the South could in fact stop the North’s blitzkrieg attempt to seize Seoul – even by itself with its allegedly inferior military capabilities. While the North enjoys a numerical advantage in every category of weapons, its military is essentially of 1950s vintage. The South, on the other hand, has a smaller, albeit still sizable, military equipped with the latest weapons systems. Many analysts, therefore, conclude that if both quantity and quality are taken into consideration the South wields more military power than its adversary to the North. The South’s military also maintains a high force-to-space ratio, more than twice the level many analysts consider necessary for defense, effectively leaving few sectors that can be breached by the North. Even if the North should succeed in punching a hole in the first line of defense, it would face at least two additional lines of defense before it could reach Seoul, a certainty that challenges the North’s break-through units with the likelihood of being surrounded and attacked from all sides. Such an optimistic assessment is reinforced by the results of simulations showing that the South’s qualitatively superior tanks, fighting in a defensive position, can all but decimate the North’s numerically superior but qualitatively inferior tank forces. Other simulations also show that the North’s infantry soldiers would find it practically impossible to cross the DMZ where the South’s artilleries would create a “killing zone.”

Given that Pyongyang’s blitzkrieg attempt runs little chance of success, South Korea’s capability alone should prevent Pyongyang from launching an all-out attack. If we add the military capability that the United States can bring to bear upon the North in the event of an invasion, the South wields enough power to deter a second Korean War. No wonder, as one author notes in a recent article, that there has been no war since 1953: “deterrence has been clear and unambiguous.”

Things may look quite different from a North Korean perspective, however, for the simple reason that what one side considers a defensive or deterrent capability may be perceived as threatening by the other side. While most in the South and the United States uncritically accept that their combined military forces are purely defensive and thus pose no threat, the North has to be concerned about the capabilities as well as the intentions of the countries that surround it. For intentions may change and today’s tool of defense can be used for tomorrow’s aggression. Scholars of international relations have long noted the inherent difficulties of distinguishing offensive from defensive capability, which lie at the core of what they call the “security dilemma.” As such, North Korea, no more or less immune from these problems, views the South’s defensive capability as a potential offensive capability.

The North is also concerned about indications that its military capability actually lags behind the South’s, undermining its security and even threat-
ening its survival (just as there are indications of the South’s inferiority in certain sectors that make Seoul worried about its security). Many standard measures of power reveal the North’s inferiority. It has half the population of the South. Its gross domestic product (GDP) stands at 3–5 percent of the South Korean GDP. Because of an economic crisis, North Korea’s import of weapons systems all but ceased by 1993, while Seoul routinely ranks among the world’s largest weapons importers.

The disparity in economy is reflected in military spending as well. The South’s military spending began to surpass the North’s in 1972, and the gap has widened ever since, resulting in a cumulative difference of $38.7 billion by 1990. In 1991, Seoul spent $7.8 billion on its military, more than three times Pyongyang’s $2.0 billion. Ten years later, Seoul’s defense budget had grown to $10.0 billion, almost eight times as much as Pyongyang’s, which shrunk to $1.3 billion. While Pyongyang is allocating a higher ratio of its national budget to the military, it would not be unreasonable to interpret the North’s higher military spending ratio as a desperate effort to match its adversary’s spending level – obviously without success.

If only one-fourth of military expenditures are spent to improve the quality of the military’s fighting capability, with the rest spent for maintenance and operation, the South cumulatively invested about $10 billion more than the North on new weapons and upgrades over the past twenty years. Since the South’s manpower in uniform is about 40 percent smaller than the North’s, the amount that Seoul has invested to improve each soldier’s combat power is disproportionately larger. In addition, South Korea’s far heavier investment in support systems should increase its effective combat power beyond what is represented in simple comparisons of firepower.

If one includes US military expenditures on its troops stationed in and around Korea, the combined military spending far exceeds what Pyongyang spends on its military. According to one estimate, the combined US-South Korea expenditures totaled about $12 billion in 1986, four times the North’s military spending. The best study on the military spending by the two Koreas, carried out by Hamm, concludes after a careful examination of various data that the North’s military capabilities stood at 32–56 percent of the South’s in 1995, a ratio that fell even further for the rest of the decade. James Dunnigan estimates that in 1995 the North had about a third of the South’s “combat power.” According to Les Aspin, then Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, “South Korea alone can bring to bear about six-tenths Desert Storm Equivalents of total ground combat force to deal with North Korea’s about six-tenths Iraq of total ground offensive power.” Given that Desert Storm overwhelmingly defeated Iraq, Aspin’s measure indicates that the South’s army as early as 1992 had the ground capability to achieve a similar victory over the North’s army and that its relative strength has continued to increase thereafter. Although Aspin’s indices cannot be independently verified, they do add some credence to the results derived by Hamm and Dunnigan.
That the North is trailing the South in the arms race on the peninsula is vividly illustrated by a comparison of the quality of their weapons systems. Most of the North’s fighter aircraft, for example, were introduced before 1960, with the notable exception of about 30 MiG-29s, their only modern jet fighters; the South’s air force has its own share of aged aircraft but also maintains 60 F-16s, considered far superior to MiG-29s. The contrast is more pronounced in the category of main battle tanks. While the North’s main battle tanks, the T-54/55 and T-62, were introduced in 1949 and 1961, the South upgraded most of its 1950s’ vintage M-48s to M-48A3s or M-48A5s between 1980 and 1990.16 During the same period, moreover, the South began producing a new-generation tank, the K-1, that carries several state-of-the-art features found in the M1 Abrams.17 It is indicative of the arms race trend that Seoul proceeded in the 1990s to manufacture the K-1 A-1, an upgraded version of the K-1, while Pyongyang failed to acquire the T-72 that had initially caused Seoul to launch the K-1 project. Furthermore, it was the South, not the North, that imported the latest Russian tank, the T-80U, in the late 1980s. Not only does the South Korean army operate as its mainstay the K-1 A-1s that are comparable to the most advanced US tank, but it also maintains 80 T-80Us.

As the North fell behind, it might perceive behind certain aspects of the South’s political institutions an “ulterior motive” to invade, in the same way that the South points to evidence of the aggressive nature of the North’s system. For example, the original 1948 constitution of the Republic of Korea (ROK) declared that the Republic was the sole legitimate state on the Korean peninsula whose “territory shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands,” while the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) constitution designated Seoul as the country’s capital. According to these constitutions, the other side was an illegitimate group that unconstitutionally occupied a part of Korea. As Wada Haruki rightly points out, the ROK and the DPRK, if seen from a constitutional perspective, were entities that could not coexist or reconcile with each other, without undermining their own raisons d’être: “Because one’s mere existence negates the other, their relationship can be compared to the state of war without the declaration of war.”18

Despite several constitutional revisions in subsequent decades, the South’s current constitution still claims jurisdiction over the entire Korean peninsula, with the implicit but unmistakable implication that what governs the North is an illegitimate regime that should be overthrown. The North, in contrast, has no such clause in its current constitution. Article 9 of the North’s constitution, amended in 1998, states that “in the northern half, the DPRK strengthens the people’s administration and strenuously executes the three revolutions of ideology, technology and culture to accomplish the complete victory of socialism” [emphasis added]. This subtle but critical difference is also repeated in the clauses about unification policy. The North confirms as the basis of its unification policy the three principles of unifica-
tion on which Kim Il Sung and Park Chung Hee agreed in 1972: “It strives to realize the unification of the fatherland on the basis of the principles of independence, peaceful unification and grand national solidarity.” In contrast, the South, while adopting the policy of peaceful unification, asserts “liberal democracy” as the principle of unification, a formulation to which the North has never agreed nor is likely to find agreeable.

The South, furthermore, continues to rely on several UN resolutions as the legal justification not only for claiming to be the sole legitimate government over all of Korea but also for the use, under the UN Command, of military force to occupy the North and to unseat a regime that it deems an illegal anti-state entity. It also has laws, such as the National Security Law, that define the North as an illegal anti-state organization that must be eradicated. The North has no comparable law. Although the North’s ruling party commits itself to the superiority of its juche ideology – just as the Grand National Party adopts liberal democracy and market economy as its guiding ideology – a political party by definition valorizes political programs and the philosophy behind them. The above comparison is no proof that the South harbors an “ulterior” motive to invade the North or that the North has no aggressive intentions. Nevertheless, it suggests that Pyongyang’s concerns about its security are not unwarranted.

Since the commander of the US Forces in Korea (USFK) maintains operational command over the South’s military, Pyongyang is concerned about not only the South but also the United States. The USFK maintains operational plans that include strikes deep into North Korea in the initial phase of a war and maneuvers designed to sap the North’s military readiness, some of which border on preemptive strikes. The possibility of preemptive strikes came dangerously close to becoming a reality in 1994 when President Clinton almost chose a military strike option to destroy Pyongyang’s nuclear facilities, only to turn away at the last minute. The 1994 episode was not unique. Even before President Bush included the North in the “axis of evil” and in the Nuclear Posture Review, and before preemptive strikes became part of the official policy of the administration, the United States has contemplated, threatened, prepared for, and even came close to preemptive nuclear attacks against North Korea several times since the Korean War. For example, in 1998, the US Air Force practiced a preemptive nuclear strike against the North; in 1976, in reaction to the killing of two American soldiers, b-52 bombers simulated bombing runs, flying from Guam toward the DMZ before veering off at the last moment; and in 1968 when the North Koreans seized the American spy ship Pueblo, “the initial reaction of American decision-makers was to drop a nuclear weapon on Pyongyang,” an idea helped by the fact that “all the US F-4 fighter planes held on constant alert on Korean airfields were loaded only with nuclear weapons.”

The foregoing is not an argument that Seoul and Washington are bent on launching an attack to destroy the North. While the Bush administration after September 11 included North Korea in a number of nuclear or preemp-
tive strike scenarios, it has sought a multilateral solution and continued humanitarian assistance. Seoul under the Roh Moo Hyun administration seems to have as its top priority the prevention of an open military conflict. From Pyongyang's perspective, however, the strategic situation cannot but appear dangerous. North Korea, therefore, seems to be attempting to level the playing field by building up asymmetric capabilities.

Faced with a perceived threat to its existence, a state can adopt two kinds of defensive policies to protect itself: it can try to increase its own capability or seek an alliance with other states. The latter became an impractical, if not unrealistic, option for Pyongyang in the 1990s when its traditional allies, China and Russia, raced to embrace South Korea as their new friend. Moscow went to the extreme of letting its mutual defense treaty with the North expire and taking more than ten years to replace it with a toothless friendship treaty. While Beijing did not follow Moscow's example by spurning the North, it seems engaged in a policy of maintaining equidistance. Given its dilapidated economy and deteriorating technological base, Pyongyang found it difficult, if not impossible, to match the South's power in every category. Its decision to enhance its missile program seems to have grown out of a perceived necessity to counterbalance the South's growing power superiority in an asymmetric way.

An analysis of the physical characteristics of North Korean missiles corroborates such a hypothesis. South Korea has a qualitative advantage in air power, but if North Korea succeeds in catching planes on the ground with a surprise attack, its quantitative advantage might be a serious factor. With even fewer aircraft available after the initial blow, the South's air force would be hard-pressed to execute both an air-to-air campaign and close air support. Although it is very unlikely that the North's aged aircraft could penetrate the South's sophisticated air defense system and catch its combat planes on the ground, Pyongyang might nevertheless launch a surprise missile attack on the South's air assets.

Still, such an attack would be hardly alarming for the South. Even if the North achieves a high degree of accuracy – 50 meters of circular error probability (CEP), a ridiculously high number in light of the well-established inaccuracy of North Korean missiles – it needs to expend ten Scud-b missiles to inflict 25 percent damage on a command center and 86 missiles to render one air base runway useless for operations. Given that Scud-b CEPs are estimated at 0.15–3.3 percent of the range – which means that they can strike within 100 meters at least half the time – the North would need 41 missiles to destroy an air base command center and 101 missiles to take out a runway. In other words, the North has to fire 40 to 100 missiles to disable one air facility while the South maintains more than 100 airfields, not to mention the extensive network of highways it can use to fly aircraft in an emergency. Moreover, in a war situation, the North would not be able to take all the preparatory steps, such as flying a balloon to measure high-altitude winds, and, as a result, its missiles' accuracy would be compromised.
even further. Even if North Korea currently possesses more than 200 Scud-b missiles, they pose little threat to the South’s air capability.

The obvious question then is: why does Pyongyang seem obsessed with missiles that have little offensive military value? The question becomes all the more perplexing given the North’s persistent efforts in its development programs to increase missile range but not missile accuracy.

While Pyongyang began missile production in the 1960s with the short-range missiles FROG-5 and FROG-7, its missile development programs really advanced in the early 1980s when it reverse-engineered a SCUD on the basis of a Soviet missile purchased from Egypt. After test-firing a modified-A in 1984, it reduced the missile weight to extend its range to 320–40 km. The modified-b, test-fired in 1985, is probably as inaccurate as the Soviet Scud on which it is based. After successfully marketing the modified-b in the Middle East, Pyongyang further extended the Scud missile range by lengthening the body so that it could carry more fuel. The outcome, the modified-C, probably represents the maximum range for a missile based on Scud technology because even heavy investments in increased fuel capacity will only marginally extend the range.

Since the modified-Bs can reach anywhere within the South, if Pyongyang intended to use them for an offensive purpose it would have made more sense to direct attention and resources to improving the missile’s accuracy rather than developing a yet longer range missile on the basis of the Scud technology. But it instead chose to increase the range by “bundling up” four Scud engines to produce a Nodong with a range of 1,000 km. Succeeding in this task, Pyongyang increased the range yet again, this time by multi-staging: using a Nodong in the first stage and a modified-C in the second. The result, known in the United States as “Taepodong-1” and called “Paektusan 1 ho” by the North, flew over Japan in a 1998 test-fire and is estimated to have a range of 2,000 km.

In the end, Pyongyang has consistently and exclusively focused on maximizing its missile range, and it has relied entirely on Scud technology to do so. Both of these decisions have larger political implications. To reach the continental United States with an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), Pyongyang would need to develop something completely different from the Scud engine, the only technology it has worked with for the past twenty years. There is little evidence that the North has the technological wherewithal to develop an ICBM-capable engine. Without outside help, which is not likely to come, it would be extremely difficult, although certainly not entirely impossible, for Pyongyang to develop a new class of missile engine powerful enough to propel an ICBM. Meanwhile, Pyongyang’s exclusive focus on increasing missile range at the expense of accuracy – coupled with its sense of insecurity and its inability to match the South’s more sophisticated, more powerful weapons systems – suggests that North Korea’s leaders have sought some kind of capability to deter a war. Such missiles can be used as a weapon of terror with which to convince political leaders in the South and in the United States
that their preemptive strikes would be punished with a massive destruction of civilian assets. Despite its incredibly inaccurate missiles, the North possesses the capacity to wreak havoc on Seoul and Tokyo even with conventional warheads, a prospect that Pyongyang hopes will dissuade South Korean and American political leaders from launching preemptive strikes. The North’s inaccurate missiles, combined with nuclear weapons that Pyongyang began claiming to possess in 2005, provide it with a potent deterrent.

The United States and South Korea jointly have more than enough military capacity to turn all of North Korea into ruins. Lacking the ability to match them in kind, the North seems to have turned to a method that will give it the power to inflict pain and damage that can outweigh any potential benefits of a first strike. It is the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction applied to the Korean peninsula, North Korean style. While the South has the power to assuredly destroy the North, the latter holds on to the asymmetric capacity to terrorize the other side into foregoing an attack. It is not just deterrence that has sustained the armistice without war in Korea; it is mutual deterrence.

**From the security dilemma to a virtuous cycle**

Such a condition of mutual deterrence based on power imbalance and asymmetric terror balance is inherently volatile. Not only is one side unable to counter, much less eliminate, the other’s advantage in another category, but the very effort to nullify the other’s advantage is likely to trigger an asymmetric response that results in an even greater gap. Their overall military advantage notwithstanding, Seoul and Washington would not likely act on their advantage by eliminating Pyongyang’s ability to retaliate; their attempt to do so would only lead Pyongyang to increase its asymmetric advantage. On the other side of the border, Pyongyang faces the same dilemma. This asymmetry complicates military plans as well as arms control measures. It is liable to produce misunderstandings about the situation and misperceptions about the other’s intentions, with the potential to turn a mistake into a larger-scale tragedy.

To move out of this volatile mix requires, first of all, that both parties recognize that they are in a situation of mutual assured destruction as a result of the asymmetric terror balance, which itself is an outcome of a larger power imbalance. Beneath the asymmetry and imbalance lies the security dilemma that traps both sides. As they continually seek security in measures that would neutralize the other’s capability, both sides are in fact prisoners of their own failure, or refusal, to recognize the reality of the security dilemma. To stop this self-defeating vicious cycle requires a move beyond narrow, self-centered perceptions. Once both sides adopt a perceptual framework that takes into consideration the other side’s security concerns – and understands that the threat is not unilaterally posed but mutually produced – they can begin to free themselves from the self-perpetuating security dilemma.
The security dilemma can be currently seen in its most acute form in the dispute over North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles that has become more contentious after President Bush took office. The fundamental difference between Clinton’s near-success in resolving the issues and Bush’s stalemate lies not in Bush’s unwillingness to talk or in his proposal to expand the agenda for talks but in his refusal to end the enmity between the two nations. The most recent US-North Korea joint statement, issued in October 2000, shows that it was precisely because the two governments made a commitment to end hostile policies toward each other that the North was ready to scrap its missile program:

Recognizing that improving ties is a natural goal in relations among states and that better relations would benefit both nations in the 21st century while helping ensure peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and in the Asia-Pacific region, the US and the D.P.R.K. sides stated that they are prepared to undertake a new direction in their relations. As a crucial first step, the two sides stated that neither government would have hostile intent toward the other and confirmed the commitment of both governments to make every effort in the future to build a new relationship free from past enmity.30

It is precisely this commitment “to build a new relationship free from past enmity” that is required to defuse the nuclear and missile issues peacefully. Pyongyang is not likely to give up its nuclear weapons programs unless Washington shows a willingness to address its security concerns. Nor is Washington likely to drop its nonproliferation demand unless Pyongyang convincingly demonstrates a less hostile stance. Hence a possible solution seems to lie in a set of reciprocal concessions whereby the United States provides a security guarantee in exchange for Pyongyang’s termination of its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. Only when Washington and Pyongyang come to the realization that their security policies are riddled with contradictions and that the US-North Korea relationship is entrenched in a security dilemma will such a solution become possible.

Given the logic of the security dilemma, it would be not only a fundamental misunderstanding but also a tragic miscalculation to suggest that the North is engaged in extortionist behavior by wielding its weapons for profit. Although the North is currently experiencing deep economic problems, it will not likely embrace with enthusiasm such economic incentives as the removal of sanctions in the absence of measures that allay its security concerns. Pyongyang views its military capabilities and missiles as the only guarantor of its survival. To treat what it considers to be a “life-or-death” issue exclusively as an economic bargaining chip is to put the cart before the horse. Such an approach ignores the stubborn reality that North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs are a byproduct of the enmity between the two nations and that steps toward a solution can only be taken with a reciprocal
recognition that both sides of the DMZ share a legitimate security concern as well as a common responsibility for the persistent military tension. Without such a recognition, hawks in the United States and South Korea, as well as in North Korea, will take every opportunity to halt and reverse any peace process and maintain the military status quo.

In addition to its growing nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities, forward deployment of North Korea’s infantry units and artillery forces near the DMZ represents a major source of concern for the United States and South Korea. Here again the logic of the security dilemma is easy to see. Just as the United States and South Korea are concerned about North Korea’s force deployment near the DMZ, so the North is equally concerned that 90 percent of ROK and USFK personnel are positioned within 50 kilometers of the DMZ. Each side claims that its own forces are defensive and that the other’s are offensive; each justifies its own force posture on the basis of a perceived threat from the other’s force posture. If either Pyongyang or Washington argues that its forces are purely defensive, then it should also be prepared to accept the other side’s claim that its forces are also defensive. Given Seoul’s growing military superiority over Pyongyang, by the same token, the South should be prepared to scrap its plans for weapons purchases and force modernization in exchange for Pyongyang’s halting of its missile programs and limiting its arms purchases. Washington, the major weapons supplier to the South, should also be prepared to support Seoul’s decision to stop arms imports and to stop reinforcement of the USFK in exchange for Pyongyang’s pledge not to export or import weapons. Once such an arms limitation is agreed upon and implemented, the two Koreas can start the process of building down their arms stockpiles.

Some of these steps were in the works during the Clinton administration. The Agreed Framework of 1994 laid the political framework that would allay in a step-by-step, reciprocal manner America’s concerns about the North’s nuclear program and the North’s concerns about the US military posture. The Clinton administration was apparently on the verge of negotiating away the missile problem in its final days precisely because it acknowledged the dynamic of the security dilemma on the Korean peninsula, as clearly reflected in Perry’s admission that the “primary reason [for North Korea’s missiles] . . . is deterrence . . . They would be deterring the United States.” On the basis of this acknowledgment, the Clinton administration moved to normalize diplomatic relations with North Korea and guarantee that it would not be attacked with nuclear weapons; the Kim Jong Il administration reciprocated by freezing its nuclear and missile programs. The Bush administration halted these processes, allegedly for a policy review, and has thus far stubbornly refused to acknowledge that the United States and North Korea are trapped in a vicious security dilemma cycle. The Bush administration’s insistence on taking unilateral steps – rather than adopting reciprocal measures – goes directly against the premises underlying the Agreed Framework and other joint statements, and could well undo the achievements made through negotiations.
Current US force restructuring in the South will likely further complicate the strategic balance. While these reforms are ostensibly driven by an effort to better confront terrorism and regional conflicts by taking advantage of technological advances to develop a high-tech twenty-first-century military, their application to Korea is likely to exacerbate Pyongyang's security concerns. Given that the US plan involves reducing the number of American soldiers stationed in the South and relocating the remaining troops to a rear area, why such a paradoxical outcome? Such a restructuring, if carried out under the condition of symmetrical power balance, would seem to help mitigate the security dilemma. But in Korea it effectively removes the US military from harm's way, out of the North's artillery range, weakening – if not removing – the asymmetric advantage that the North relies on as a deterrent. From the perspective of an insecure Pyongyang, it would seem that Washington's move is meant to gain a first-strike capability in order to implement the officially declared preemptive strike doctrine in Korea. The North might respond by building more and longer-range missiles and putting them on a launch-on-warning footing. And the tension over the Korean peninsula will rise another notch. The South may find it logical to increase, as it plans to, its military power in response to Washington's reduction of troops, but that too will end up contributing to heightened tensions, not enhanced security.

A way out of such an escalating cycle of security dilemma, therefore, is not likely to be found in military responses. A solution lies in crafting a framework within which both sides recognize the other's legitimate security concerns and take measures that simultaneously address both sides' concerns. A good starting point would be for the two to reaffirm the political commitment that they made in the 2000 joint communiqué to the termination of past enmity and the start of an effort to build amity. While their reaffirmation can be expressed in many different forms – an exchange of unilateral statements, a joint communiqué, or a multilateral statement – a clear, public expression of political will is most critical.

North Korea has long demanded the replacement of the Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty with the United States and the normalization of diplomatic relations, but has in recent years shown interest in what it calls “a non-aggression pact” in lieu of a peace treaty. It has even indicated its willingness to consider dropping a long-standing demand that the US military withdraw from South Korea. After the historic summit in 2000, Kim Dae Jung revealed that Kim Jong Il expressed his “understanding” that the US military might remain on the Korean peninsula even after reunification. Washington, however, regards the Korean armistice as the cornerstone of the US alliance system in North-east Asia and therefore untouchable. It is “virtually heresy even to raise the issue, let alone discuss a detailed road plan toward ending the armistice,” as two insightful observers have noted.

The potential for a mutual acknowledgment of security concerns or the replacement of the armistice agreement with a peace treaty has decreased with the election of Bush to a second term and the further consolidation of
the Republican Party’s control over Congress. Should the Bush administration maintain its inflexible approach, Pyongyang is likely to reciprocate with a redoubled unwillingness and even an increased hostility, which would only lay an additional justification for maintaining a hostile posture, exacerbating the security dilemma. This leaves Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo and Moscow as critical actors who can play a constructive role in facilitating a political rapprochement between Washington and Pyongyang. In this context, it is encouraging that the September 2005 round of the Six-Party Talks produced an agreement on the ultimate goals of keeping the Korean peninsula free of nuclear weapons and working on a peace mechanism.

One possible way to resolve the differences seems to lie in a set of simultaneous nonaggression pacts between the parties to the Korean War that would establish a new, truly peacekeeping function for UN forces. The challenge, however, is determining who is party to the war. Washington and Pyongyang are certainly parties, but there is little agreement on the status of Seoul and Beijing. Although China as one of the three signatories is still a de jure party to the armistice, it is not a de facto party because the de facto state of war that had existed between China and the United States and South Korea ended when Beijing opened diplomatic relations with both. Also, despite Pyongyang’s insistence that Seoul is not a party, Seoul’s de facto, if not de jure, status has to be reckoned with. A peace regime on the Korean peninsula cannot be built if the South is not involved as a full party. One logical solution, therefore, would be the creation of a peace regime in which Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang adopt a set of documents that lay out a comprehensive set of measures. Perhaps in a form similar to the Agreed Framework, such a document would commit the parties to certain steps in order to end the state of war among the three. Seoul and Pyongyang already made progress on this front when they signed a nonaggression pact in 1991 and held a summit in 2000. To officially end the de facto state of war, they need to take the additional step of adopting a peace declaration. At the same time Pyongyang and Washington must take meaningful measures to end their de facto and de jure state of war. If the two adopt a peace treaty, complemented by a peace declaration between Seoul and Pyongyang, it will not only increase the likelihood that the three will honor the peace regime but will also help allay the concerns of Seoul and Washington that Pyongyang is trying to split the allies with a peace treaty only with Washington.

The peace regime among the three parties should be bolstered by a regional regime because arms control and disarmament require the wider participation of regional states such as China, Russia, and Japan. The involvement of all three is essential for a North-east Asia-wide regime of restraints in arms transfers to the Korean peninsula and for a regional agreement to make the peninsula a nuclear weapons-free zone. On a regional level, Washington needs to recognize that Beijing and Moscow would find intolerable the idea of a reunified Korea in which the United States remains the sole foreign military presence, just as it would be unfathomable for
Washington or Tokyo to accept a reunified Korea under Chinese or Russian influence. All four powers have a vital stake in peace on the peninsula, but they all prefer a divided Korea that no single power controls to a unified Korea under the lopsided influence of one of them. The international system in North-east Asia, in other words, has an interest in maintaining the status quo even at the price of continued instability and the risk of mutual assured destruction. Furthermore, the United States, Russia, China, and, to a lesser degree, Japan, have a further incentive to perpetuate the fragile division that gives them political and economic leverage over the two Koreas.

If the peace process is intensified through the successful implementation of these mechanisms, the two Koreas may be able to enter a qualitatively higher level of inter-Korean dialogue. That, in turn, may eventually pave the way toward a confederal or federal form of political integration. At this juncture, the multilateral peace talks, which began as a specific forum for peace on the Korean peninsula, can develop into a region-wide security forum for North-east Asia. The focus of the multilateral forum can then shift to a more encompassing peace mission for East Asia. For example, the non-nuclear declaration signed by the two Koreas and endorsed by the four surrounding powers can serve as a basis for building a regional nuclear-weapons-free zone that includes not only the Korean peninsula but also Japan. The multilateral regional forum can perhaps start addressing regional security issues such as the arms race in North-east Asia. As it expands its scope, such a dialogue may develop into a multilateral common security organization similar to the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

E.H. Carr illuminates in his seminal work, The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919–1939, a dialectical way in which realism and idealism interact. Realism, Carr explains, emphasizes facts and their analysis, and tends to downplay the role of purpose. Realism tends to “emphasize the irresistible strength of existing forces and the inevitable character of existing tendencies, and to insist that the highest wisdom lies in accepting, and adapting oneself to, these forces and tendencies.” Carr warns that this type of realism, though at times needed as a corrective to the excesses of utopianism, might result in “the sterilization of thought and the negation of action.” He admits that there is also a period when “utopianism must be invoked to counteract the barrenness of realism.” Thought without analysis is utopian; but thought without purpose is barren. In a final dialectical synthesis, therefore, Carr proposes that mature thought combines purpose with observation and analysis: “Utopia and reality are thus the two facets of political science. Sound political thought and sound political life will be found only where both have their place.”

How do we find a place for reality and utopia in designing a path toward a peace regime on the Korean peninsula? A beginning lies in envisioning a creative synthesis of brute power politics and liberal institution-building, a step that is critically contingent on transcending the antagonistic self–other divide to imagine the other in a non-antagonistic way. In North-east Asia, a simple acceptance of power politics provides no guarantee of peace.
Tripartite militarization by the United States, South Korea, and Japan will only precipitate negative reactions from North Korea, China, and Russia, aggravating an already tense environment of the region and possibly triggering a more intense arms race and even a war. As long as the United States, South Korea, and Japan pursue the realist power strategy of strengthening and integrating their military alliances, the international system in the region will continue to be tense. At the same time, South Korea and Japan may become prisoners of their complacency, unable to develop their own vision of a new regional order – one that would slow the arms race and promote a peaceful interaction among the nations of North-east Asia. This vicious cycle was first broken by the Agreed Framework in which each party to the confrontation not only recognized its adversary’s security concerns but also took measures to allay them. Further progress was made when Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Il held a summit in 2000, moving the two Koreas closer to amity. The final step in this first round of the peace process was to be Clinton’s own summit meeting with the North Korean leader. Clinton’s contradiction-ridden “congagement” policy was taking a decisive turn toward engagement, only to be stopped and reversed by Bush. The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review stifled debate within the Bush administration by reasserting the two-wars strategy. Thus, proponents of containment have gained an almost irreversible momentum and mortally crippled those who favor engagement, which will only exacerbate the tension that Clinton’s “old” two-war strategy had created.

To resolve the missile issue and to build peace in the region, a new security framework is needed – one that de-emphasizes the centrality of power politics and stresses the importance of multilateral interactions among countries in North-east Asia. A balance must be struck between alliance politics and multilateral peace endeavors. Continued arms transfers from the United States to South Korea, the accelerating arms build-up by South Korea, and joint efforts in arms production – particularly of ballistic missile defense systems – by Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo make any peace proposal a barren gesture. An initiative for peace talks must be coupled with a blueprint for reducing the centrality of military transactions within the military alliances. To acknowledge the reality of the security dilemma and the necessity of reciprocity is the first step toward a regional peace initiative.

Notes
1 For the official position, see, for example, the Ministry of National Defense, Ch’amyǒngbuǔ kukpangjongch’aek (Participatory Administration’s National Defense Policy), 11 July 2003; http://www.mnd.go.kr/jungchaek/baekseo/2003/2003main.htm


13 Hamm, op. cit., p. 115.
15 See Aspin, op. cit., p. 24.
17 The K-1 A-1, an upgraded version, is equipped with a CO₂ laser-range finder and a thermal viewer together with composite armor, an integrated fire control, and an adjustable suspension, making the K-1 A-1 comparable to America’s most advanced tank, the M-1 A-1. If the M-1 A-1’s qualitative advantage over Iraq’s T-72 tanks in Desert Storm is any indication, the South’s K-1 A-1s would enjoy a similar, if not greater, edge over the North’s T-62s, which are Soviet-designed tanks one generation older than the T-72s. David Miller, Modern Tanks and Fighting Vehicles, New York: Smithmark, 1992, pp. 66–9.
19 Li, Sang-Chol, “Hanbando Chöngjönch'ejewa UNC wisang (Korean Peninsula Armistice System and UNC’s Status),” Hanbando kunbit’ongje (Korean Peninsula Arms Control), vol. 34, 2003, p. 309.
20 In the 1998 constitution revision, the North also removed a clause that prescribed “a grave punishment” for people who committed “the gravest crime” of betraying the country and people. The North has no law comparable to the South’s National Security Law, and its criminal law has been revised a number of times to remove such references as “wŏnsu [enemy]” or “chōk [adversary],” phrases that apparently referred to South Korea. “Hyŏngpop, namhanamsi ’chōk’ kyujŏng sarajyo (Criminal Law Purged of ‘Enemy’ Definitions Implying South Korea),” Han’gyo sinmun, 23 September 2004; http://www.hani.co.kr/section-003000000/2004/09/p003000000200409231853534.html
21 It is also not without significance that the Korean Workers Party, when it revised its bylaws in 1980, dropped such aggressive purposes as the “completion of revo-

olution in the South” and replaced them with benign objectives like “to achieve reunification on the basis of the principle of grand national unity.”
27 Ibid., p. 47.
28 The previous administrations of Clinton and Kim Young Sam flip-flopped on whether to exercise a military option to take out the North’s nuclear program.

This, of course, assumes that the South’s aircraft remain concentrated and on the ground despite an impending strike, a highly unlikely scenario.

The document further states:

Building on the principles laid out in the June 11, 1993 U.S.-DPRK Joint Statement and reaffirmed in the October 21, 1994 Agreed Framework, the two sides agreed to work to remove mistrust, build mutual confidence, and maintain an atmosphere in which they can deal constructively with issues of central concern. In this regard, the two sides reaffirmed that their relations should be based on the principles of respect for each other’s sovereignty and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs.

(U.S.-DPRK Joint Communiqué, Department of State, 12 October 2000)


In other words, the reduction and relocation have the same effect on the strategic balance on the Korean peninsula as a successful Star Wars would have had on the US-Soviet strategic balance during the Cold War.


No country is closer to Japan than Korea. From ancient times, the two neighbors have enjoyed intimate exchanges. Yet today Japan has relations with only one of the two Korean states, and even that relationship is contentious. While Japan normalized relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK or South Korea) in 1965, it has not yet formally recognized the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea). This asymmetry is a major obstacle not only to repairing Japanese-Korean relations overall, but to ending the Cold War in Asia.

Although Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro has made two diplomatic visits to North Korea in the past five years, progress on normalization remains stalled. Several major conflicts hang over the discussions: North Korea’s overall military posture, its nuclear weapons program, and its abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. In order to return to the negotiating table and resolve these issues, the two countries must not only address their outstanding disputes but also grapple with the historical roots of the conflict.

The history

History remains an open wound in Japanese-Korean relations. The citizens of both Koreas endured great suffering and harm under Japanese colonial rule. Yet when Japan normalized relations with South Korea in 1965, it expressed no regret or apology for the past. Only in August 1995 did Prime Minister Murayama express Japan’s regret and apology for the pain and harm done by the four decades of colonialism. Three years later, the governments of Japan and South Korea signed a Joint Declaration affirming the contents of the Murayama Statement.

Yet, even after forty years of normalization and with millions of people crossing each year between the two countries, the wounds inflicted by Japanese imperialism are scarcely healed and easily inflamed. For instance, when Japan laid claim to a disputed island between the two countries – Tokdo (in Korean) or Takeshima (in Japanese) – heated demonstrations broke out throughout South Korea. A subsequent speech by South Korean
president Roh Moo-Hyun in March 2005 roundly criticized Japan, describing the Maruyama Statement and the Joint Declaration of 1998 as inadequate.

However belated and incomplete, the process of normalization between Japan and South Korea has at least been underway for forty years. Japan’s relationship with the northern half of the peninsula is considerably less advanced. For instance, until 2002, Japan neglected even to apologize to North Korea. If history remains a contested issue between Tokyo and Seoul, it is an even thornier topic between Tokyo and Pyongyang. North Korea’s founder and first leader was an anti-Japanese partisan leader, Kim Il Sung. The fierce hatred between Kim Il Sung and the Japanese “bandit suppression” forces became the very founding spirit of the country. This history makes a Japanese apology and expression of regret for that past indispensable to the normalization of relations.

Japan’s role in the Korean War is also a sore point. When the United States entered the war to assist South Korea, Japan automatically became an important base for US military activities. Japan’s National Railway, coastguard, and Red Cross all cooperated in the war on the US side. Japanese sailors led the 1st Marine Division to their Inchon landing, and minesweepers of the Japanese coastguard cleared the way for US forces to land at Wonsan. Throughout the war, US b-29 bombers from Yokota (near Tokyo) and Kadena (in Okinawa) flew ceaseless bombing raids on North Korean towns, dams, and other facilities. Japan did not decide to provide this support in accordance with any decision by its government. As a defeated and occupied country, it was unconditionally obliged to obey the orders of the occupation forces. Although the Japanese people therefore have no sense or memory of having participated in this war, North Korea considers Japan a belligerent country that provided full support for the United States and South Korea.

For fifty-two years since the cessation of hostilities, the ceasefire in the Korean War has persisted without a peace treaty. US bases are still in Japan, and Japan and North Korea remain locked in confrontation. During this time, North Korea engaged in irregular activities to gather intelligence on US and Japanese bases, sending spy vessels and agents with false passports, and at times abducting Japanese people in order, presumably, to secure passports for spies sent overseas. In the 1990s, the development and deployment of medium-range missiles and the suspicions over North Korean nuclear weapon development plans heightened tensions between the two countries. As victims of the 1945 US nuclear attack, the Japanese people cannot tolerate the emergence of any new nuclear weapon-possessing country among its neighbors. Ending the development of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and the deployment of its missiles aimed at Japan is a major subject for Japan-North Korea negotiations. Naturally the North Korean side will also make proposals about US bases in Japan.

In September 1990, nearly half a century after the end of colonial rule, negotiations between Japan and North Korea began on these matters. North
Korea had begun to rethink its position following the end of the Cold War and the opening of diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and South Korea. The Japanese government knocked on North Korea’s door, expressing regret over past colonial rule, and a mission went to Pyongyang consisting of Kanemaru Shin of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Tanabe Makoto of the Japan Socialist Party (JSP) bearing a personal letter from Prime Minister Takeshita Noboru. A three-party (LDP, JSP, and Workers Party of Korea) declaration on normalization was adopted. The Japanese side expressed an apology and a desire to compensate for the misery and misfortune caused by thirty-six years of Japanese colonialism and for the losses incurred in the forty-five years since, and a readiness to open diplomatic relations.

Japan-North Korea negotiations on normalization then opened in January 1991, continued until May 1992, then broke down following the eighth round. Combining to block progress were Japan’s resistance to any compensation for post-1945 “losses” to North Korea (despite the “Three-Party Agreement”),1 the negative attitude of the South Korean government toward any Japanese rapprochement with North Korea, suspicions over the North Korean nuclear program, and, not least, US pressure. Kanemaru himself was arrested on corruption charges in November 1992. In 1995, the Murayama cabinet made an effort to reopen negotiations, but ended up only providing some rice aid to the North. It was not an opportune time for rapprochement. Missile tests and various spy ship encroachments into Japanese waters complicated negotiations as did the nuclear crisis that in 1993–94 brought the United States and North Korea to the brink of war.

More ominously, another issue gradually came to overshadow all other concerns: North Korea’s abduction of Japanese citizens fifteen years earlier. The suspicions began in the 1980s. Then, in 1987, KAL Flight 858 exploded over the Andaman Sea, killing all 115 people aboard. South Korean courts convicted a North Korean woman named Kim Hyon Hui, who had been traveling on a fake Japanese passport. She stated that a woman abducted from Japan, whom she knew as Lee Eun Hye, had taught her Japanese.2 A few years later, a North Korean agent who had defected to South Korea gave evidence that he had seen a woman named Megumi at a training facility for agents. Yokota Megumi was 13 years old when she disappeared from the Japanese port city of Niigata in 1977. Her parents immediately took up her case, giving rise to the movement for the rescue of abducted Japanese. The issue of the abductions became – and remains in 2005 – the major single stumbling block to reconciliation.

The abductions

On 17 September 2002, Prime Minister Koizumi surprised the international community by visiting Pyongyang. This unexpected turn of events was nevertheless the result of long, secret negotiations that began at the initiative...
of the North Korean side at the end of 2001. “Mr. X,” a North Korean who enjoyed the confidence of leader Kim Jong Il, approached Tanaka Hitoshi, head of the Japanese Foreign Ministry’s Asia-Pacific Bureau. Tanaka reported to Prime Minister Koizumi, and secret contacts began. The only ones privy to these negotiations were the prime minister, his foreign minister, and three other high-ranking officials. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe Shinzo, who favored a hard line on the abduction issue, did not find out about the negotiations until they were revealed at a Pyongyang meeting of bureau heads of the two Foreign Ministries in August 2002. The announcement of the Koizumi visit came at the end of the same month.

The September meeting between the Japanese and North Korean leaders was tense and dramatic. It lasted a single afternoon. Koizumi reportedly took with him his own bento lunchbox to Pyongyang and then brought it back to Tokyo that night, unopened. The two leaders agreed to “make every possible effort for an early normalization of relations.” Koizumi expressed “deep remorse and heartfelt apology” for “the tremendous damage and suffering” inflicted on the people of Korea during the colonial era, while Kim Jong Il apologized for the abductions of thirteen Japanese and for the dispatch of spy ships in Japanese waters.

More specifically, Kim admitted and apologized for the abduction between 1977 and 1982 of a group of Japanese civilians, among them a schoolgirl, a beautician, a cook, and three dating couples whisked away from remote Japanese beaches. In addition, North Korean agents – now believed to have been Japanese Red Army hijackers who settled in Pyongyang in 1970 – abducted three students who had been touring Europe and brought them to Pyongyang either to teach Japanese-language courses to intelligence agents or so that overseas operatives could appropriate their identities. Insisting that he had no personal knowledge of all this, Kim blamed the abductions on “some elements of a special agency of state” who were “carried away by fanaticism and desire for glory.”

Three weeks after the Summit, five of the thirteen original abductees returned to Japan in a special plane. The “Pyongyang Five” – two married couples snatched on summer evening dates by the Japan Sea in 1978 and a woman seized as a 19-year-old nurse on the island of Sado in the same summer – returned to Tokyo on October 15, 2002, for what was supposed to be only ten days to two weeks. According to the agreement between the two governments, the Five would then return to Pyongyang to work out their long-term future and that of their families.

Kim also apologized for the incursions of “mystery ships” into Japanese waters. Just a week before the Pyongyang meeting, Japan salvaged a “mystery ship” it had sunk after a brief gun battle in the East China Sea in December 2001, leaving Kim little choice but to acknowledge the incursion. A Special Forces unit had been engaged in exercises, he claimed lamely: “i had not imagined that it would go to such lengths and do such things . . . The Special Forces are a relic of the past and i want to take steps to wind
them up.” The North Korean side attributed these acts of abduction and spying – clear violations of the human rights of Japanese citizens and of the sovereignty of the Japanese state – to the abnormal situation between the two countries and promised that they would never be repeated.

Japan’s apology, meanwhile, was made possible when Pyongyang dropped its demand for compensation in exchange for the promise of Japanese economic “cooperation.” Both sides stood to benefit from such cooperation. According to calculations by the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, normalization would lead to substantial “aid and development” programs, opening lucrative business opportunities for core factions of the Party and their associates in the recession-hit construction industry in the future building of roads, bridges, dams, power stations, railways, and other elements of North Korean infrastructure. For Pyongyang, on the other hand, the need for economic reconstruction outweighed reservations over abandoning the claims for compensation for colonialism and war.

Initially Koizumi’s diplomacy and the moves to normalize relations with North Korea drew a positive public response in Japan. North Korea’s admission and apology for its criminal actions were an act without precedent in its history. Kim Jong Il’s conciliatory response, which conceded so much to his old enemy Japan, showed how determined he was to achieve a breakthrough in relations. Yet instead of taking this apology as a desire to turn over a new leaf, Japan and the United States denounced the North Korean leader and called for further punishment. As for Japan’s apology, it was completely forgotten in Tokyo and ignored by the Japanese media. The “harm” caused by Japan over thirty-five years of colonial rule seemed to the dominant media and much of the public as nothing compared to the harm done to Japan in more recent decades.

As the news of North Korea’s admissions sank in, and as the abductees themselves returned, widespread shock, anguish and anger followed. Japanese anger flowed over Pyongyang’s explanations of the fate of the remaining eight abductees. Much of the information strained credulity. One couple was said to have died between 1979 and 1981, both of heart failure although the husband was only 24 years old and his wife 27. Further, the husband allegedly suffered a heart attack when swimming on a day that, it turned out, a typhoon had battered the Korean coast. A second couple was said to have died within a week of each other in 1986, one of cirrhosis of the liver and the other of a traffic accident. A third couple died along with their child as the result of a defective coke heater. The bodies of all of these people conveniently disappeared without a trace in the mid-1990s, washed away in floods, dam bursts, and landslides. Pyongyang reported that the remains of a seventh casualty, allegedly killed in a traffic accident in 1996, had first been washed away in the floods, but then recovered and re-interred in a common grave. Subjected to DNA testing in Japan, the remains turned out to be those of a middle-aged woman. The eighth, and most poignant, case is that of the schoolgirl Yokota Megumi. According to Pyongyang, she
had married a North Korean man and given birth to a daughter, Hye Gyong, but had suffered from depression and committed suicide in 1993 when her daughter was just 5 years old.

Angry, disbelieving Japanese families of the victims denounced Pyongyang’s explanations as a travesty and insisted that their loved ones must still be alive and should be brought back, if necessary “by force.” The suspicion spread that there might be more Japanese abductees than at first suspected – perhaps as many as forty or even 100.

The media showered attention on the abductees. The Japanese public greeted the drama of the slow “recovery” of their Japanese-ness and the eventual casting off of their Kim Jong Il badges with tears of national relief. Yet the mainstream media failed to mention that during the colonial era Japan had abducted hundreds of thousands of Koreans to work as prostitutes (“comfort women”) for Japanese soldiers or to work in mines, factories, and low-ranking jobs in the Japanese military such as guarding Western prisoners during World War II. Viewed in this larger historical context, by Koreans north and south, the transformation of the obviously criminal abductions of thirteen Japanese citizens into the crime of the century and the Japanese into the ultimate victims of Asian brutality had a painful air of unreality.

The abduction issue owes its centrality to a national movement composed of three main strands. The National Association for the Rescue of Japanese Abducted by North Korea (Sukuukai, or the “Rescue Association”), the National Association of Families of Japanese Abducted by North Korea (Kazokukai, or “Families Association”), and the Association of Dietmembers for the Japanese Abductees (Rachi Giin Renmei”) all believe in applying maximum pressure on North Korea and, should negotiations prove unsuccessful, rescuing the abducted. Sato Katsumi, head of a small think-tank specializing in Korean problems and founder of the Rescue Association, has written that Japan should focus on “operations” that provoke the Kim Jong Il regime to collapse from within. In other words, the abduction problem serves as a means to the end of forcing the collapse of the North Korean system. And yet, the overthrow of the Pyongyang government, which many supporters of these abductee organizations unwittingly support, will likely create such political and social upheaval as to make family reunions rather improbable.

Responding in part to pressure from these three groups, Japanese lawmakers in the ruling party argued that the five abductees who returned to Japan should not be sent back to North Korea – in direct opposition to the agreement Koizumi had just negotiated. The Japanese government additionally demanded the handover of the abductees’ children, i.e. their “return” to a country of which they knew nothing. Several of the children were now adults. Five of them were at that point going about their lives in Pyongyang with no idea that their parents were Japanese, let alone abducted Japanese. Nor did they know that their parents would not be allowed to come home.
DNA tests showed in October that Kim Hye Gyong, the supposed daughter of Yokota Megumi, was indeed biologically tied to Yokota’s parents, bearing out North Korea’s claims. Although Megumi’s father, Yokota Sigeru, expressed a strong desire to meet his grandchild, even if that meant traveling to North Korea, officials of the Rescue Association persuaded him against making such a visit.

As the drama of these families unfolded before the nation, major television channels, newspapers, and journal publishers catered to, and in turn cultivated, a mass market of hostility, fear, and prejudice. From 1991 to 2003, Japanese publishers brought out some 600 books on North Korea, the overwhelming majority of them virulently hostile. After the Koizumi visit to Pyongyang in September 2002, television news offered almost saturation coverage of North Korea, often three or four programs during a single day, each exposing one or another negative aspect of the North Korean state or society, from defectors and starvation to corruption, missiles, and nuclear threats. The memoirs of the defector Hwang Jang Yop, published in Korean with the title “I Saw the Truth of History: Memoirs of Hwang Jang Yop,” received the Japanese title of “Declaration of War on Kim Jong Il: Memoirs of Hwang Jang Yop.” The sequel had an ever more lurid title: “Have No Fear of a Mad Dog.” A manga (comic book) life of Kim Jong Il published in mid-2003, depicting Kim as a violent, bloodthirsty, and depraved despot, sold half a million copies in its first three months, probably more than all books ever published in English about Korea put together. Weekly and monthly magazine stories about North Korea poured out at a phenomenal rate. Japanese readers seemed to relish stories of unmitigated “evil,” especially when spiced with prurient detail. Nothing seemed to sell better than details of Kim Jong Il’s complicated family life, his wives, mistresses, and the “yorokobigumi” or “happiness brigade” of young women alleged to be his harem.

As the mood of anti-North Korean hatred and contempt spread through Japanese society, prominent figures involved in the attempt to achieve normalization faced virulent abuse. When an unknown assailant set a time bomb at the residence of Tanaka Hitoshi, the foreign ministry official who had been involved in negotiating with North Korea in 2001–2, Tokyo’s popular and powerful governor, Ishihara Shintaro, promptly declared that “[h]e got what was coming to him.” When challenged, Ishihara said he had not meant to support terror, but added that Tanaka “deserved to die ten thousand deaths.”

When follow-up talks on normalization were held in Kuala Lumpur at the end of October 2002, Japanese delegates demanded the unconditional handover of the children of the five returned abductees and announced that no other discussions or negotiations could take place until the date for such return was fixed. In an act of breathtaking insensitivity, if not hypocrisy, Japan also demanded compensation from North Korea for the abductions. Since Tokyo had always ruled out any compensation to the victims of the
colonial era, including the many thousands of forced laborers, the Japanese message to Pyongyang therefore seemed to be that Korean and Japanese lives were of different value. A handful of Japanese lives weighed far more than hundreds of thousands, indeed millions, of Koreans. The North Korean side, meanwhile, demanded that the Five be sent back to Pyongyang. It viewed the attachment of new conditions for the reopening of negotiations between the two states as a breach of the Pyongyang Declaration. The fragile basis of trust on which Koizumi and Kim had pledged to launch the relationship was shattered.

From his powerful position within the government, Abe Shinzo took the view that North Korea would be forced by poverty and desperation to accept Japan’s terms. “In Japan,” he said in November 2002, “there is food and there is oil, and since North Korea cannot survive the winter without them, it will crack before too long.” But North Korea did not crack. Instead, a prolonged stalemate, lasting not one but two winters, followed.

The rift

The downturn in Japanese-North Korean relations after the abduction revelations and the return of the Five to Japan encouraged the hard-liners in Japan. In February 2004, for instance, the Diet passed a bill that put a stop to trade and to the remission of funds to North Korea, preparing the legal grounds for imposing economic sanctions. There was some doubt as to whether this law could be used to apply pressure to North Korea over the abductions, and in any case it was clear that Prime Minister Koizumi did not intend to implement it. Still, hardliners passed the bill to intimidate North Korea.

And yet, negotiations continued behind the scenes to reopen normalization talks. On 22 May 2004, Prime Minister Koizumi returned to Pyongyang to meet a second time with Kim Jong Il. Koizumi explained his purpose as he departed for Pyongyang: “[i]t is in the national interest of both countries to normalize the current abnormal Japan-North Korea relationship, to turn a hostile relationship into a friendly relationship, confrontation to cooperation.” In Pyongyang, Koizumi reaffirmed his desire to establish diplomatic relations and promised that, so long as the Pyongyang Declaration was adhered to, Tokyo would not implement sanctions. He also pledged 250,000 tons in food aid and $10 million worth of medical supplies, and promised to address the question of discrimination against Korean residents in Japan. In response, the North Korean side agreed to consider the five returned abductees permanently rather than temporarily returned, to permit their children to leave the country with Koizumi, to allow Charles Jenkins and the two children of Jenkins and Soga Hitomi to meet with Soga in a third country, and to reopen “sincere reinvestigation” into the eight whose whereabouts were uncertain. Both sides agreed to return to the basic principles of the Pyongyang Declaration and renew constructive negotiations.
Later, when asked his impression of the North Korean leader, Koizumi told the Diet, “I guess for many his image is that of a dictator, fearful and weird, but when you actually meet and talk with him he is mild-mannered and cheerful, quick to make jokes... quick-witted.” In other words, Koizumi confirmed the view of Kim Dae Jung and Madeleine Albright, among others, that Kim Jong Il was a man to do business with. In fact, so keen was Kim to talk with George W. Bush that he suggested that Koizumi provide the music so that they could sing together – even to the point that their throats became sore. Subsequently, Koizumi pledged to normalize the relationship within his remaining two years of office, if possible within a single year.

The Families Association roundly castigated Koizumi, describing the mission as having brought about the “worst possible outcome” because he had not personally brought back Soga’s family or secured adequate explanation of the many anomalies in the original report. Most TV commentators and presenters echoed this criticism by describing the visit as a “diplomatic failure.” Yet the Japanese people in general seemed to take a different view. According to a May 23rd poll in the Asahi Shimbun, 67 percent of respondents evaluated Koizumi’s mission positively. On the question of the opening of diplomatic relations, 47 percent were in favor, considerably more than the 38 percent opposed. Other surveys, by the Mainichi and Yomiuri newspapers, produced similar results. Furthermore, when the members of the Association criticized the Prime Minister in very emotional terms, protest messages from all over the country poured into their offices in response.

The success of Koizumi’s second attempt at northern diplomacy hinged on the reinvestigation into the missing eight abductees. The initial report in November did not produce any significant revelations. The head of the Japanese delegation, returning to Japan, reported the North Korean response that all eight were dead and that there was no record of the others (including Soga Hitomi’s mother) sought by Japan ever having entered the country. The reinvestigation also found that most of the relevant data on these eight people had been erased and only a few documents could be provided. Japanese investigators did manage to interview some persons connected with the cases, however, the most important being Kim Chol Jun, the husband of Yokota Megumi. In 2002, the North Korean side described Kim as “an employee of a trading company,” but in 2004 he turned out to have been working for the very “special agency” that Kim Jong Il held responsible for the abductions in the first place. Although he spent two and a half hours talking with Japanese officials, Kim Chol Jun declined to be photographed or videoed, or to provide any DNA sample that might prove that he was actually Hye Gyong’s father. Nor did he allow Japanese officials to take away for examination the photograph that showed him with Yokota Megumi and their daughter. He did, however, hand over what he said were the remains of his wife that he had dug up after the initial burial, then had cremated and kept.
On December 8, Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Hosoda Hosoyuki announced the result of the officially commissioned analysis. The National Research Institute of Police Science had been unable to produce a result but the medical department of Teikyo University, which has a high reputation in the field of mitochondrial DNA analysis, had been more successful. Isolating DNA from the remains, it found no trace of Megumi’s DNA but instead detected the DNA of two unrelated people. The government concluded that the remains were not Megumi’s and announced that it was “extremely regrettable that the other side’s investigation has not been sincere.” Japan sent a stern protest to Pyongyang.

On December 24, the Japanese government published its detailed report on the results of its investigation of the materials brought back from Pyongyang. It concluded that there was “absolutely no evidence” to support North Korea’s claim that the eight had died (or that two other alleged abductees had ever entered the country in the first place). The government believed in the “possibility of their being still alive,” and demanded their immediate return, on pain of severe, unspecified penalties. This unwarranted leap of logic – from the failure of North Korea’s reinvestigation to establish convincingly the death of the abductee victims to the assumption that they must be alive and the demand that they be returned – passed unnoticed in the furor of anger at North Korea.

To protest what it construed as North Korea’s deliberate deceit, the Japanese government froze the dispatch of any further “humanitarian” aid – after half the grain and medical supplies promised by Koizumi in May had been sent – thus indicating that the aid had been political rather than humanitarian. It also inched closer toward the imposition of sanctions. It was hard to see how the gap between Japan’s insistence on return and North Korea’s insistence that the disputed abductees were all dead could ever be bridged.

North Korea’s formal response was given on 24 January in the form of a Central News Agency “Memorandum.” On the problematic bones, it stressed that the Police Institute and Teikyo University analyses had come to different conclusions and argued that it was unscientific and improper to place absolute weight on one conclusion only. It pointed out that since human remains in North Korea are cremated at 1,200 degrees centigrade it was “common sense” that DNA analysis could not produce any result. And it protested that the name of the analyst was not attached to the expert opinion. The Memorandum’s conclusion – that the outcome of the analysis was “a fabrication by corrupt elements” – may have been an exaggeration. But the doubts it raised over the outcome of the Japanese analysis could not be lightly dismissed. The Memorandum also denounced Japan for breaking its promise, made in a statement signed by the head of the Japanese delegation at the time when the bones were handed over, “to hand these remains directly to Yokota Megumi’s parents, and not to publish the matter.” It concluded by saying that “[n]ot only has Japan gone to the lengths of fabri-
cating the results of an analysis of human bones and refused to concede that the abduction problem has been settled, but it also completely denies our sincerity and effort. It is they who have pushed North Korea-Japan relations to this worst-ever pitch of confrontation."

It goes without saying that North Korean statements have little credibility in Japan. In the dispute over the mitochondrial DNA analysis, the Japanese government’s pronouncements were taken, at least initially, as definitive. Japan’s level of technology was assumed to have exposed North Korea’s deception. It did not help North Korea’s case that its account of Megumi’s life had been full of inconsistencies from the start. There was the alteration of the date of her death and the confusion over which hospital she had received treatment. There was the improbable story of her stroll in the hospital grounds when she escaped the attention of the accompanying doctor and hanged herself from a pine tree, using a rope she had made out of her own clothing.11 Also, in two other cases, Japanese DNA tests failed to establish a connection between the victims and the remains provided by North Korea.

Although Japan did not take North Korea’s protest seriously, Pyongyang gained support from an unexpected quarter: the prestigious international scientific journal Nature. In a 3 February 2005 article, Nature revealed the identity of the person at Teikyo University who had conducted the analysis. This analyst, Yoshii Tomio of Teikyo’s medical department, admitted to Nature that he had no previous experience in the analysis of cremated specimens and described his tests as inconclusive. He compared the samples to “stiff sponges that can absorb anything” and that could very easily be contaminated by anyone coming in contact with them. In short, one of the world’s most authoritative scientific journals pronounced the Japanese analysis as anything but definitive.

Furthermore, the Teikyo lab had used up the five tiny samples, making independent verification impossible. Yoshii Tomio himself, in a 1999 textbook on DNA analysis, wrote that because the DNA extraction procedure was so delicate, subject to error, and likely to meet challenge in the courts, the principle of independent confirmation was crucial.12 In other words, in meeting his commission from the Japanese government, Yoshii had not followed the practice he himself prescribed.

When the Japanese government’s Chief Cabinet Secretary, Hosoda Hiroyuki, called the article inadequate and a misrepresentation of the government-commissioned analysis, Nature responded with a highly unusual editorial:

> Japan is right to doubt North Korea’s every statement. But its interpretation of the DNA tests has crossed the boundary of science’s freedom from political interference. Nature’s interview with the scientist who carried out the tests raised the possibility that the remains were merely contaminated, making the DNA tests inconclusive . . . The problem is
not in the science but in the fact that the government is meddling in scientific matters at all. Science runs on the premise that experiments, and all the uncertainty involved in them, should be open for scrutiny. Arguments made by other Japanese scientists that the tests should have been carried out by a larger team are convincing . . .

Japan’s policy seems a desperate effort to make up for what has been a diplomatic failure . . . Part of the burden for Japan’s political and diplomatic failure is being shifted to a scientist for doing his job – deriving conclusions from experiments and presenting reasonable doubts about them. But the friction between North Korea and Japan will not be decided by a DNA test. Likewise, the interpretation of DNA test results cannot be decided by the government of either country. Dealing with North Korea is no fun, but it doesn’t justify breaking the rules of separation between science and politics.13

Apart from a brief reference in one weekly journal, it was months before any word of this extraordinary exchange penetrated into the Japanese mass media. As for Yoshii Tomio, one week after the Nature editorial he was promoted to the prestigious position of head of the forensic medical department of the Tokyo metropolitan police department. Nature subsequently reported that it had been told Yoshii was therefore not available for media comment.14 When the suggestion arose in the Diet that this smacked of government complicity in “hiding a witness,” the Minister of Foreign Affairs responded that it was “extremely regrettable” for such aspersions to be cast on Japan’s scientific integrity.15

The response of the abductee families to the DNA controversy has followed the government line. The Yokotas seem to have decided to ignore the unsatisfactory nature of Japan’s DNA test process and North Korea’s complaints. They have also, so far, ruled out other possible actions, such as going to North Korea themselves to visit their granddaughter and directly pressuring the North Korean authorities to conduct a more sincere investigation until they get satisfactory answers.16

As time passed, other irregularities in the Tokyo story emerged. While Yoshii, and, apparently, others of his team were silenced, his senior colleague Ishiyama Ikuo wrote in the June issue of the medical journal Microscopia that the authorities must have reached the conclusion they did about the remains based on “other information” than Yoshii’s report, since that analysis could only establish that her DNA was not present in the sample. If, indeed, the conclusion that the remains were not Megumi’s rested on evidence other than the DNA analysis, the Japanese government has yet to explain what other evidence it used to substantiate its conclusions.

In Pyongyang on 31 March 2005, Song Il-ho, Deputy Director of the Asian Department of North Korean Foreign Ministry, a key person in Japan-DPRK negotiations, met with a Japanese delegation in Pyongyang. He criticized the Japanese government’s lack of sincerity, noting that Japan
tried to distinguish colonial rule and abduction, both phenomena of the twentieth century divided by only twenty-five or so years, as if one were a past and the other a present issue. He expressed his government’s grave concern that North Korea had carried out what he described as “exhaustive” investigation into the abductions, producing sixteen witnesses for the Japanese to interview in Pyongyang in November 2004, and even handed over the remains of Megumi, only to be rebuffed and insulted by the Japanese. As if taking a leaf from Yoshii’s textbook on DNA procedure, he suggested that the remains could be submitted to a third country institution for independent verification. He concluded, “We can live without Japan. Koizumi has done what needed to be done, but he has been blocked by opposition forces.”

Security issues

While the stalemate over the abductions continued, the crisis over security and nuclear issues sharpened. In 1994, a nuclear confrontation between the United States and North Korea was only resolved on the very brink of war by the mission of Jimmy Carter to Pyongyang. Under the subsequent “Agreed Framework,” North Korea froze its energy-related nuclear programs and placed its plutonium waste under international supervision in return for the promise of construction of two light-water nuclear reactors, a supply of heavy oil in the interim until they could be constructed, and normalization of economic and political relations.

The Agreed Framework held for almost a decade. During it, Japan’s security concerns focused especially on North Korea’s missiles. Perhaps no single incident so concentrated attention on North Korea as the launch of the Taepodong that soared over Japanese skies and then dropped into the Pacific Ocean late in August 1998. The thought that much of Japan might lie within North Korea’s missile range helped galvanize a rethinking of security issues. From the late 1990s, reflecting its deep fear of North Korea, Japan has devoted extraordinary effort to preparing the institutional framework for an “emergency,” which is the preferred euphemism for war: the “New Guidelines” agreement of 1997, followed by the 1999 Regional Contingency Law, the “Terror” and Iraq Special Measures Laws of 2001–3, and the Emergency Laws of 2004.

Although North Korea served as a major impetus for this change in Japan’s strategic and military thinking, the two countries cannot be compared in terms of conventional military forces or extent of state power. Despite its nominal constitutional pacifism, Japan’s annual military expenditure is twice North Korea’s entire Gross Domestic Product, and its GDP is roughly two hundred times greater. True, North Korea has a 1.1 million strong army, worthy—in sheer numbers—of a superpower. However, exercises or maneuvers are rarely reported. Many units spend their time foraging and farming for subsistence, and equipment is mostly 1950s vintage (the
Iraq War of March 2003 showed the futility of even 1970s military equipment in contemporary conditions. Shortage of fuel is so severe that pilots can only practice flying their planes for a few hours per year. Japan for its part has an army bigger than either the British or French, the fifth largest navy in the world (after the United States, Russia, China and the United Kingdom), and the twelfth largest air force in the world, larger than Israel’s. It has 200 F15 fighters, 16 submarines (and builds one new one each year), four Aegis destroyers (and two more on order); and budgeted in 2004 for two 13,500-ton aircraft carriers (coyly described as “helicopter carriers”). Behind Japan stands the military colossus of the United States. Moreover, Japan launched two reconnaissance satellites in March 2003 to spy on North Korea. Were North Korea to launch spy satellites into the skies above Tokyo or Osaka, a Japanese preemptive strike to get rid of them would no doubt follow quickly.

While this upgrading of Japanese military capabilities was underway, suspicions over the North Korean nuclear program flared into a new crisis. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly returned from a visit to Pyongyang in October 2002 saying that Pyongyang had confessed to him a secret uranium enrichment weapons program. The United States then suspended the supply of heavy oil under the Agreed Framework and in January 2003, North Korea responded by withdrawing from the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and resuming its nuclear plans. Faced with this new stage of the crisis, the countries in the region began a series of meetings in Beijing in August 2003 that became known as the Six-Party Talks that included the United States, Japan, Russia, China, South Korea, and North Korea. Japan was naturally involved as a major participant, but was hamstrung by the fact that popular anger about abduction continued to weigh heavily on its policy. Despite its best efforts, it was unable to persuade other participating countries to include the abduction issue on the agenda of the talks.

On 10 February 2005, the North Korean Foreign Ministry declared that it possessed and would expand its nuclear arsenal. Possession of such an arsenal, let alone its deliberate expansion, would clearly violate the 1992 South-North Declaration on Nuclear Disarmament and the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework, and, in spirit at least, the Pyongyang Declaration, in which Japan and North Korea had committed themselves to resolve nuclear issues by complying with all related international agreements and by dialogue. Yet with normalization talks between the two countries suspended because of the abduction issue, Japan had no direct channels through which to protest or pursue the issue.

While Japan has long enjoyed the protection of the US umbrella, North Korea had faced the threat of nuclear weapons aimed explicitly at it ever since the Korean War, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union from 1991 it lost the protection of the Soviet nuclear umbrella. Despite this, however, regional security can never be advanced by North Korea arming itself with nuclear weapons. That would only increase the risk of war. From August
2003, therefore, the regional countries came together in the Six-Party Talks in an effort to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis. Even though Japan is both a nuclear victim and a declared non-nuclear state, it seems to be unable to contribute to the process of having North Korea give up its nuclear weapons plans.

With negotiations stalled over the abductions, Japan has no way to make its voice heard by North Korea. Some, including influential figures in the national Diet, demand economic sanctions against North Korea in order to bring pressure to bear toward resolving the abduction problem, but specialists believe that sanctions can only be effective if applied multilaterally, and therefore should be reserved as an absolute last resort for the nuclear issue. Furthermore, specialists on the North Korean economy point out that economic sanctions are unlikely to be effective because Japan’s trade and economic relations with North Korea have already shrunk drastically. Bilateral trade fell from approximately 120 billion yen in 1980 to a mere 27 billion yen in 2004. Despite the clamor for sanctions, Japan no longer has the effective means of exerting economic pressure on North Korea.

Pyongyang made clear, in high-level South–North exchanges in June 2005, that if only the United States would treat it in a friendly manner, recognizing and respecting it, it would be ready to return to the conference table and would not need to “have a single nuclear weapon.” The Six-Party Talks duly resumed in July. By the time of the three-week recess early in August, both the United States and North Korea seemed to have modified their positions, and there was some prospect of an agreement. Still considerable time and effort are likely to be needed to resolve the issues. A Japanese contribution to that process is crucial, and since North Korea’s nuclear weapons are mainly directed at US bases in Japan, a resolution of the North Korean nuclear problem can even be described as a matter of life and death for Japan.

With negotiations over the abductions completely frozen, Japan was open to the criticism that it was simply stalling. Most likely, it can only begin to exert influence on North Korea when it makes clear that a nuclear disarmament pledge will open diplomatic relations and economic cooperation. For this purpose, Japan needs a new strategy for tackling the abduction problem.

Toward normalization

Negotiations between Japan and South Korea over normalization lasted thirteen years, ending in February 1965. Talks with North Korea began in January 1991 and have continued for fourteen years. In early twenty-first-century Japan, public anger over crimes committed against it has triumphed over reason, while injured virtue has overwhelmed diplomacy. Politicians and media figures have lost the capacity to imagine how the world might look from a North Korean perspective or to grasp the core of aggrieved justice that lies at the heart of Pyongyang’s message. This failure of imagina-
tion now seems to affect relations with China and South Korea as much as North Korea and raises deeper questions about the matrix in which it is embedded.

Japanese politicians and critics tend to make a large fuss over the possible Japanese payment in compensation – now disguised as “economic cooperation” – for the forty-five years of colonial rule over Korea. The highest estimate of this sum is about 1.5 trillion yen (roughly $12 billion). This is substantial to be sure but far less than what the Japanese taxpayers have recently forked over to rescue just one of Japan’s many floundering banks and trivial by comparison with, for example, the sums spent in recent years to keep the dollar up and the yen down in global currency markets. North Korea has been experimenting for over a decade with various efforts to get its economy going again by adopting market-based reforms, and even The Economist now thinks that these shifts are probably irreversible.21 But economic reform is not really possible under conditions of continuing sanctions and lack of capital. A significant Japanese capital transfer could help the country’s reconstruction efforts, as the sum of $500 million did for South Korea in 1965.

Prime Minister Koizumi faces a rising wave of pressure to denounce and impose sanctions on North Korea. For three days in late June 2005, his critics from the Families and Rescue Associations engaged in a highly publicized “sit-in” outside his office to demand sanctions, yet Koizumi refused even to meet them.

Koizumi is a puzzling and paradoxical politician. His regular annual visits to the Yasukuni shrine outrage neighboring Asian nations, especially China, and his cooperation in the military missions in Afghanistan and Iraq suggest total commitment to the United States. Yet he has adopted normalization of relations with North Korea as his personal political mission. By twice visiting Pyongyang, he has plainly distanced himself from both domestic pressure for sanctions and Washington’s view of North Korea as beyond the pale and impossible to deal with. Janus-like, he is torn between a loyalty to the United States forged in the past and a future dream of a central role for Japan in a revived Asia. He also finds himself caught between conservative and neo-conservative elements in Japan itself.

In September 2002 and again in May 2004, glimpses of a radically different East Asia – of reconciliation, normalization, and cooperation – could be seen in Koizumi’s initiatives. Whether by instinct or calculation, he seems to grasp that Japan faces foreign policy choices in the early twenty-first century that it failed to grasp in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: how to accomplish a peaceful, cooperative, equal relationship with its neighbor states on the Korean peninsula and throughout North-east Asia. Delivering his formal policy speech to the opening session of the Diet on 20 January 2005, Koizumi declared his commitment “to play a positive role in the construction of an open ‘East Asian Community’ sharing an economic prosperity that embraces diversity,” an echo of his earlier pledge to contribute to “the creation of an East Asian region.” His statement also
called to mind the language on North-east Asian regional cooperation in the Pyongyang Declaration that he issued jointly with Kim Jong Il in September 2002. It is extremely significant that sixty years after the collapse of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere and its ideology, the Japanese Prime Minister should thus speak of a new regionalism. The transition from “North-east Asian” regional cooperation and a framework for confidence building to “the construction of an East Asian community” is a measure of how history has moved forward between September 2002 and January 2005. Now there is likely no other way forward for Japan.

How sad, then, and how maddening is Koizumi’s stubborn insistence on his Yasukuni rituals and his inability to resolve the abduction issue. Both combine to block Japan-North Korea negotiations and to divide Japan from even its partner countries in the Beijing process, South Korea and China. The sentiments of the families of the abductees are easily understood. At the same time, the Kim Jong Il regime has admitted and apologized for the abductions, returned to Japan the five survivors and their families, and reported after two investigations that the other abductees are dead and their possessions and remains have not survived. However unsatisfactory these explanations, the only alternative is to accept North Korea’s findings for the time being and resume the negotiations in a sincere fashion. To reject the outcome of North Korea’s two investigations is to refuse to negotiate with the Kim Jong Il regime, and Japan cannot afford to do that. After changing its negotiating approach, Japan must then pursue negotiations on the abduction issue tenaciously. Japan’s concerns are more likely to be met through the resumption of dialogue and the building of an East Asian community of peace, stability, and trust than by pressure aimed at bringing down the North Korean regime.

To normalize relations with North Korea, Japan must draw up a balance sheet of the pain and suffering caused by its colonial control over Korea and its support for the United States in the Korean War. Second, normalization of relations will require that North Korea put an end to the irregular and hostile relations of the past half century, admit the illegal acts committed during this period, promise not to commit such acts in the future, and make amends for such acts. Third, the military tension between the two countries must be reduced. The development and deployment by either side of weapons threatening the security of the other will have to stop. Fourth, both countries will need jointly to strive to contribute to regional and global harmony.

There is a further dimension. Japan must undergo a kind of internal normalization. During the modernization of the nineteenth century, Japanese constructed a national identity as “non-Asian.” To this day, Japanese society retains a deep vein of anti-Asianism, which persists in its most concentrated form in government, media, and popular thinking about North Korea. There are 870,000 Korean residents in Japan or Zainichi, almost all originating from the southern provinces of Korea. Because of the vagaries of history since the collapse of the Japanese empire in 1945, 400,000 now have South Korean citi-
zenship, 240,000 North Korean citizenship and 230,000 Japanese citizenship. Another 100,000 “returned” to North Korea in the decade after 1958. Those Korean residents in Japan affiliated with North Korea are cut off from their ancestral graves and from their families in South Korea. North Korean-oriented organizations and individuals suffer periodic intimidation and censure. Prominent figures in government, bureaucracy, the media, and academia involved in the attempt to achieve normalization face virulent denunciation. One in five children attending North Korea-affiliated schools in Japan report various forms of abuse, from verbal to physical attack, their clothes sometimes slashed with cutters while on the subway or on the street. These internal divisions within Japanese society are only likely to be healed when the country comes to terms with its still unknown neighbor across the sea.

Any improvement in North Korea-Japan relations will require some change in the US position. As the diplomatic stalemate surrounding North Korea deepened in 2005, the US government issued contradictory signals. On the one hand, it recognized North Korea as a “sovereign state,” insisted it had no plans to attack it, and demanded that North Korea return unconditionally to the Beijing conference table. On the other hand, Washington seemed determined not only to drive Pyongyang into a corner but also to run roughshod over the objections of its Beijing conference partner countries. The Bush administration called Kim Jong Il a “tyrant” and a “dangerous person” and denigrated his country as an “outpost of tyranny.” Although President Bush could afford only 45 minutes for a frosty meeting with South Korean President Roh in June, he made himself available a few days later for almost the same amount of time to a prominent refugee from North Korea, Kang Chol Hwan, in order to share with him the notion that North Korean violations of human rights were the key issue and that regime change was his true objective. North Korea’s objection that “showing up at the talks just because the party that completely negates us and is trying to overthrow us is telling us to come is something that only a fool would do” was not altogether unreasonable.

Neutralization of the North Korean nuclear weapons program through a comprehensive program of normalization of diplomatic, political, and economic relations with the Kim Jong Il regime is the shared diplomatic objective of three of the Beijing conference countries: South Korea, China, and Russia. Until the July 2005 meetings in Beijing, however, Washington seemed to be committed to the goal of “democratization” and “human rights.” Japan’s position therefore was crucial. At some point in the near future, it will have to decide where it stands.

Although Prime Minister Koizumi’s term of office was slated to run until September 2006, he gambled his political fortunes in the summer of 2005 on dissolving the lower house and conducting elections in September. This election will amount to a vote of confidence in his leadership. If this gamble is successful in gaining him the people’s confidence, will Koizumi then take steps to achieve his political goal of opening relations between Japan and North Korea? Only time will tell.
Notes

1 This item was never part of the official government-to-government negotia-
tions.

2 Japanese authorities came to suspect that this was Taguchi Yaeko, who had
disappeared from Japan in June 1978 and was said by Pyongyang to have died in
a traffic accident in July 1986.

3 Sato Katsumi, Rachi kazoku “Kin Shojitsu to no arasoi” zenkyuseki,

4 A fourth organization devoted to improving relations with North Korea formed
after a parliamentary delegation to North Korea led by former Prime Minister
Murayama. The “National Association for the Normalization of Japan-North
Korea Relations” took the view that Japan had a responsibility to apologize and
atone for its colonial rule and that the various problems in the relationship were
the product of a deeply rooted abnormality that could only be resolved through
normalization. With Murayama as President and Wada Haruki as Secretary-
General, this group included former United Nations Deputy Secretary-General
Akashi Yasushi and well-known academics specializing in the study of Korea,
Okonogi Masao and Komaki Teruo. Through the turbulent years that followed,
itis remained a focus of moderate opinion contrasting with the more strident and
public “Rescue” and “Families” associations.

5 JFor a comprehensive list of North Korea-related books published since 1984, see
Wada Haruki and Takasaki Shuji (eds), Kita Chosen hon do yomu ka, Akashi

6 Ota Osamu, “Hi-seiji teki tetsugakusha o yosou daibutsu bomeisha,” in Wada
and Takasaki (eds), ibid., p. 91.


8 “Rokusha kyogi – Beikoku mo ugoku toki da,” Asahi shimbun, editorial, 22 June
2004.

9 For the Japanese government’s statement of 24 December, see Wada, Nicho

10 Ibid., p. 46.

11 Japanese officials, shown the tree in November 2004, estimated that its trunk was
a mere 10 centimeters in diameter, a circumstance that deepened their doubt
about the suicide story. “Rachi higaisha seizon no kanosei,” Asahi shimbun, 3
April 2005.

12 Nanzando, op. cit. See discussion in Wada, Nicho kankei to rokusha kyogi, pp.
43–4.


14 David Cyranoski, “Geneticist’s New Post Could Stop Him Testifying about

15 Machimura, in response to a question in House of Representatives, 30 March
2005.

16 As proposed by this author (Wada), Dojidai hiryo–2002 nen 9-gatsu–2005 nen 1-
gatsu, Nicho kankei to rachi monda, p. 48.

17 The delegation included co-author Wada Haruki. See the Song Il Ho interview
(with Wada et al.) in Nicho kankei to rokusha kyogi, pp. 101–5.

18 The expression was used by Pak Hyon Zhe, Deputy Director of Institute of
Peace and Disarmament, in meeting with this author (Wada) and others on 30
March 2005.

19 For example, Professor Komaki Teruo of Kokugakuin University. See Wada,
Nicho kankei to rokusha kyogi, pp. 51–5.

20 Asahi shimbun, 22 June 2005.


23 Various statements by President Bush, Secretary of State Rice, and Under-Secretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, January to May 2005.

24 Not only President Bush but also Vice-President Cheney and National Security Adviser Stephen J. Hadley were present at the meeting (interview with Kang, Asahi TV, Tokyo, 28 June 2005).

6 China’s new role in the US-DPRK nuclear confrontation

Samuel S. Kim

Who are our enemies? Who are our friends? This is a question of the first importance for the revolution. The basic reason why all previous revolutionary struggles in China achieved so little was their failure to unite with real friends in order to attack real enemies.

(Mao Zedong, March 1926)¹

We are in a conflict between good and evil, and America will call evil by its name. (Applause)

(George W. Bush, 1 June 2002)²

Lately there has been much talk – even heated debate – about the changing role of China in world politics, and this is hardly surprising. During more than a half century of checkered international life, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has not been known for its self-initiated preventive diplomacy in the world’s trouble spots. This is particularly so with respect to the Korean peninsula. In this strategic pivot of Northeast Asian geopolitics, the world’s four major powers – China, Japan, Russia, and the United States – uneasily meet and interact, and their respective interests coalesce, compete or clash in situation-specific ways. Viewed in this light, China’s uncharacteristically proactive mediation role in the latest (second) US-DPRK nuclear confrontation stands in marked contrast to the risk-averse “who me?” posture it held during the conflict of the early 1990s that culminated in the US-DPRK Agreed Framework on 21 October 1994.

The primary and proximate catalyst for Beijing’s hands-on preventive diplomacy has been heightened fears of potential reckless actions by the United States and North Korea as they engage in a tit-for-tat mutual provocation. But the puzzle of Beijing’s seemingly abrupt policy shift must also be understood in the context of Chinese-Korean relations more generally as well as the broader transformation of China’s foreign policy. The implications of this shift go far beyond the immediate crisis on the Korean peninsula.
From passive to proactive

The biggest change in the post-World War II history of Sino-Korean relations came in 1992 when the PRC government, after a decade of increasing contact with South Korea, decided to change its de facto policy of two Koreas to a de jure policy by normalizing relations with Seoul. After this change, arguably the most significant reorientation of post-Cold War Chinese foreign policy in the North-east Asian region, the PRC did not, however, pursue greater engagement with the Korean peninsula. Instead it more or less followed Deng Xiaoping’s foreign-policy axiom of “hiding its light under a bushel” by not placing itself on the front lines of the Korean conflict.

This was especially true in the 1993–94 US-DPRK nuclear standoff, when China played neither mediator nor peacemaker for fear it might get burned if something went wrong. The Chinese opted to sit on the sidelines with the familiar refrain that Washington and Pyongyang should resolve the dispute bilaterally. When the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) was formed as a result of the Agreed Framework, China opted not to become a member. In general, it chose not to play an active role in the implementation of the Agreed Framework. The official position of the Chinese was, “We can be of greater help being outside than inside the KEDO.” This posture – a “who me?” demeanor – fit a pattern of Chinese behavior toward the Korean peninsula in which Beijing applied a strategy of calculated ambiguity and equidistance, trying to stay out of harm’s way while keeping both Pyongyang and Seoul within its Asiacentric circle of influence.

Tellingly, this attitude was reserved specifically for the divided Korean peninsula; China was not pursuing such uninvolved diplomacy everywhere. Over the course of the 1990s, the PRC used diplomacy to resolve disputes along its long borders with Russia and the former Soviet republics. In 2001, China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan established the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as the official successor to an informal coordination mechanism in place since the mid-1990s. This was the first Chinese-initiated regional multilateral security forum in East Asia. Also in 2001, in its “state of the world message” to the United Nations, Beijing described security for the first time as being increasingly globalized, indicating that the term “globalization” (quanqiuhua) had entered Chinese strategic thinking as an “objective condition” or an “unstoppable trend” in the world economy rather than as a manifestation of US hegemony. This followed its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which has gradually brought the country in compliance with a series of multilateral norms and regulations.

China persisted in its equidistant risk-averse disposition toward the Korean conflict even after Pyongyang’s alleged revelation of the existence of a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program to US interlocutors in October 2002, the
event that, according to the received wisdom of mainstream press and pundits, brought about the second nuclear “crisis” on the Korean peninsula. Beijing’s initial response was to downplay the DPRK’s intentions and capabilities. In November 2002, for example, very senior Chinese political and national security officials argued to a visiting senior American group that China preferred not to see (as opposed to would not tolerate) a nuclear North Korea, that American intelligence might be faulty, that the North might be exaggerating its capabilities to extract benefits from Washington, and that the United States needed to take into account the legitimate security anxieties of Pyongyang if it expected North Korea to back off.

But 2003 saw a significant shift in Chinese words and deeds. As if its New Year’s resolution had been to see the nuclear standoff through to a peaceful resolution, China launched an unprecedented flurry of diplomacy. The first quarter of 2003 was busy with long-distance telephone diplomacy, as Chinese officials reportedly met with North Korean officials sixty times and passed over fifty messages back and forth between Pyongyang and Washington. On 8–9 March 2003, Beijing dispatched its Foreign Minister and Vice-premier Qian Qichen to the Chinese-DPRK border to meet Kim Jong Il and kick start trilateral peace talks involving Pyongyang, Washington, and Beijing. Amid Chinese worries that the US-DPRK nuclear confrontation could spiral out of control, Beijing also established in late March a Leading Group on the North Korean Crisis (LGNKC) headed by President Hu Jintao. The LGNKC’s mission has been to improve assessment of the intelligence “black hole” of Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities and intentions and to formulate a cost-effective conflict-management strategy.

The revival of the nuclear issue on the turbulent peninsula even attracted attention in the Chinese press. Whereas on earlier occasions the Chinese media treated problems related to North Korea with great discretion and sensitivity, the Chinese public has been provided with much more information and commentary since January 2003. Some Chinese analysts have been allowed to speak out on the unfolding developments in a relatively free and open manner. For instance, Shi Yinhong, the director of the Center for American Studies at Renmin (People’s) University in Beijing and a well-known commentator on US-China relations, forcefully argued in a January 2003 article that “the DPRK government is undoubtedly the originator, and it should be held responsible for the DPRK nuclear crisis and the potential devastating impact to security in East Asia.” Shi, in a Hong Kong newspaper interview, expressed his fear that China could even become the victim of nuclear blackmail, and he proposed that to avoid such a fate China must “break free from moral constraints and supplement diplomatic negotiation with economic means.” It is worth noting in this connection that Shi’s article was published in mid-January 2003 in the wake of Pyongyang’s withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty on January 10.
Given growing concerns that the US-DPRK nuclear standoff might spiral out of control, China was spurred in April 2003 to initiate and host trilateral talks in Beijing involving the United States and the DPRK, which followed quickly upon Foreign Minister Qian’s meeting with Kim Jong Il and Hu Jintao’s election to the presidency the previous month. The PRC Foreign Ministry was very tight-lipped about the contents and outcomes of the trilateral talks. The inconclusive ending of these talks greatly accelerated China’s conflict-management shuttle diplomacy, as Chinese leadership dispatched Deputy Foreign Minister Dai Bingquo to Moscow, Pyongyang, and Washington in July to seek ways of “finding common ground while preserving differences.”

Hu is said to have selected and sent Dai to Pyongyang in the official capacity of special envoy to carry a presidential letter to Kim Jong Il. In his letter, Hu reportedly made three key promises: (1) China would be willing to help resolve the crisis by mediating and facilitating negotiations with the greatest sincerity; (2) China would be willing to offer the DPRK greater economic aid than in previous years; and (3) China would be willing to persuade the United States to make a promise of non-aggression toward the DPRK in exchange for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Kim Jong Il told Dai that he was willing to accept China’s viewpoint and proposal to reopen talks with the United States in a “multilateral” setting while at the same time insisting that one-on-one negotiation was his ultimate bottom line. President Hu’s behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts led to the first round of Six-Party Talks, held in Beijing in August 2003.

From Beijing’s broader and longer perspective, the first round of Six-Party Talks was said to have yielded agreement on four points: the Korean Peninsula must be denuclearized; this must be achieved peacefully; a “just, rational and integral” plan is necessary; and the parties will refrain from making any statement or taking any action that might escalate the tension. The United States, however, adopted a non-negotiable all-or-nothing stance that became an obvious non-starter for real negotiations. This stance then evolved into the CVID formula – complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement – in early 2004.

The securing of a second round of Six-Party Talks in February 2004, therefore, took much additional Chinese cajoling and bribery. To obtain North Korean acquiescence to the talks, China offered new and significant amounts of economic aid and energy assistance, totaling around $50 million and including the construction of a glass factory in honor of Kim Jong Il’s birthday. The United States, for its part, seemed to treat the talks as an opportunity to forge a broad North-east Asian united front against North Korea. In fact, the CVID code was designed specifically for this purpose, and the United States would claim somewhat fancifully after the talks that all parties except for North Korea were in agreement on CVID.

The second round of talks began with an auspicious two-and-a-half hour bilateral side meeting between US and DPRK representatives. It ended in
embarrassment for China when Pyongyang attempted to make some last minute changes to what was to be the first joint communiqué of the talks. After the closing ceremonies were delayed for several hours, Beijing took advantage of its status as permanent chairman and host nation by issuing a cautious Chairman’s Statement instead of a televised joint communiqué. In addition, Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who served a dual capacity as chairman of the Six-Party Talks and head of the Chinese delegation, described an “extreme lack of trust” between Washington and Pyongyang, indicating the distance that the parties would have to travel in future talks.

The patience and tenacity with which China has pursued hands-on, preventive diplomacy can be seen in its efforts to keep the Six-Party Talks from collapsing. In the run-up to the third round of talks, China repeatedly contacted Japan, the United States, South Korea, and North Korea in a frantic effort to set timetables for both working-level meetings and the talks themselves. In March 2004, Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing visited Pyongyang, and South Korean Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon traveled to Beijing. Then Kim Jong Il took a secret train trip to Beijing in April – his third China trip in five years – to hold discussions with top Chinese leaders including President Hu Jintao, Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, and former president Jiang Zemin. Jiang is said to have told Kim Jong Il that the United States was unlikely to invade the DPRK and that therefore it would be in Kim’s interest to alter North Korea’s hard-line stance.

China’s actions at this time were motivated in part by a recognition that the United States, given the deepening quagmire in Iraq, was no longer in a position to think about unilateral military action against the DPRK. The US entrapment in Iraq meant that the degree of urgency surrounding the nuclear talks had decreased slightly, since the likelihood of a preemptive strike had declined. China’s persistence seemed to be paying some small dividends, as the United States came to the third round of talks with a concrete – albeit highly conditional – proposal, according to which the other countries involved could provide positive economic incentives to North Korea in exchange for a nuclear freeze.

Some have claimed that Chinese criticism of the US path up to that point was responsible for the US decision to offer a mild deviation from the CVID line that still lacked any major incentives up front. In reality, the deteriorating situation in Iraq and the Bush administration’s reluctance to sustain a second major foreign policy embarrassment in an election year, along with the fact that neither China, South Korea, Russia, nor even Japan truly or fully accepted the CVID formula (contrary to US claims) contributed to producing the change in rhetoric. In other words, Chinese criticisms of the US approach up to that point probably played a supplementary rather than a substituting role. However, while the news of a revised US line held some promise that the talks would make progress and while the DPRK brought its own proposal for consideration (i.e., America’s lifting of sanctions and blockade against the DPRK plus energy assistance of two million kilowatts
through the supply of heavy oil and electricity), in the end “no substantive bargaining” occurred during the three-day talks of June 2004. The United States rejected the issuance of a joint communiqué because so little headway had been made. And once again Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi took the initiative in issuing a Chairman’s Statement stating, inter alia, that “the parties stressed the need for a step-by-step process of ‘words for words’ and ‘action for action’ in search for a peaceful solution to the nuclear issue,” thus incorporating Pyongyang’s negotiating stance, and that they also “agreed in principle to hold the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing by the end of September 2004.”

Despite or perhaps because of Pyongyang’s refusal to attend a fourth round of the Six-Party Talks in September 2004, Beijing’s “bi-multilateral” shuttle diplomacy continued unabated. To re-energize the stalled talks, China invited Kim Yong Nam, North Korea’s “nominal head of state” and president of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly, to visit China on 18–20 October 2004. Kim and the Chinese side agreed in principle that the Six-Party Talks still remained the best available channel to advance a solution to the nuclear issue. During meetings several days later, Secretary of State Colin Powell and Chinese leaders also reaffirmed the need for the Six-Party framework for the talks to be resumed. Although Beijing’s efforts to resuscitate the Six-Party Talks have been substantial, Pyongyang held out for possible electoral victory of Senator John Kerry, who favored direct bilateral negotiations with North Korea. Even it continued to seek Chinese support in the wake of Bush’s re-election, Pyongyang stalled in the hopes that the administration in its second term would come up with a more flexible and accommodating position.

Caught between Beijing’s preventive diplomacy and Washington’s hard-line sanctions diplomacy, Pyongyang raised the ante with its own brinkmanship diplomacy. On February 10, the North Korean government stated that it had “manufactured nukes for self-defense to cope with the Bush administration’s evermore undisguised policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK” and that it was therefore “compelled to suspend our participation in the [Six-Party] talks for an indefinite period til we have recognized that there is justification for us to attend the talks.” Beijing’s response came in the form of a series of intensive “bi-multilateral” consultations. China’s preventive diplomacy with both Koreas reached the highest levels with an exchange of messages between President Hu Jintao and Chairman Kim Jong Il and the scheduling of a visit by Hu to Pyongyang for later in 2005. At the same time, Beijing intensified diplomatic contacts with Seoul, and all other parties increasingly looked to Beijing to find a way to reverse the DPRK position on the Six-Party Talks.

And yet, by May 2005, the Bush administration had begun to criticize China publicly for not applying greater pressure – i.e. economic sanctions – to bring North Korea back to the Six-Party Talks but without modifying its
own hard-line stand. While Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs James A. Kelly had acknowledged before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2004 that “achievements from the talks are in no small part due to the extensive efforts of the Chinese . . . and we are extremely grateful for the hard work they have been doing,” Undersecretary of State Robert Joseph issued a warning in June 2005 that if Beijing does not take more punitive sanctions against North Korea “there possibly could be very significant consequences for U.S.-Chinese relations.”

In sum, China’s preventive diplomacy has been the primary catalyst facilitating multilateral dialogues among the concerned North-east Asian states in the nuclear standoff at least from April 2003 to June 2004. Whereas in 1994 China wanted the United States and the DPRK to handle their dispute in a bilateral fashion, in 2003–4, China succeeded in drawing North Korea into a sui generis regional multilateral setting that Kim Jong Il previously had foresworn in a quest for direct bilateral negotiations with the United States.

The catalysts for China’s preventive diplomacy

Given the contrasts between China’s behavior in the two US-DPRK nuclear standoffs, what explains the differences between Chinese attitudes and behavior in 2003–4 when Beijing was devoted to preventive diplomacy, and those of a decade earlier when Beijing preferred to take the passive, risk-averse “who me?” stand? One critical catalytic factor is found not in Beijing but in the “regime change” approach in Washington, DC. George W. Bush’s “accidental” presidency began a radical fundamentalist reorientation of the foreign policy establishment from its first day in command. Just as the 1999 Kosovo War sounded alarm bells in Pyongyang and Beijing, setting in motion a Sino-DPRK renormalization process, so did the impending Iraq War – both a cause and manifestation of the Bush Doctrine – and more fundamentalist policy pronouncements by the Bush administration serve as a kind of force-multiplying that spurred Beijing into conflict-management activity.

Although Sino-US relations per se have been generally positive – at least since the resolution of the spy plane incident in spring 2001 – China has watched US defense policy with a wary eye and has watched the North Korean reaction to US policy with possibly an even warier eye. Consider the Bush government’s treatment of a rising China as its most plausible geopolitical rival as expressed in the National Security Strategy (NSS) of September 2002 (i.e., the Bush Doctrine). In setting forth the American plan for the Asia-Pacific region, the document offers China some patronizing “Do as i say, not as i do” advice:

In pursuing advanced military capabilities that can threaten its neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, China is following an outdated path
that, in the end, will hamper its own pursuit of national greatness. In
time, China will find that social and political freedom is the only source
of that greatness.

Apparently oblivious to the inconsistency, the NSS 2002 asserts a few para-
graphs later the fundamental reliance of the United States on its own
military superiority: “It is time to reaffirm the essential role of American
military strength. We must build our defenses beyond challenge.” And
further, “The unparalleled strength of the United States armed forces, and
their forward presence, have maintained the peace in some of the world’s
most strategically vital regions.”

For the Bush administration to ask China (and presumably others) to
acknowledge the obsolescence of military power, while spending and
devoting more resources to its own military budget than do the next several
dozen or more countries combined, can only be understood as a warning
message from the world’s only imperial superpower, with profound and
unsettling implications for the future of Sino-American relations and the
regional and global orders. Ironically, for all the US worry about Chinese
military power, China’s greatest gains have been in the realm of economic
power. And it is important to note that, while swings in US foreign policy
have provided proximate causes for China’s proactive preventive diplomacy,
China’s alarm is motivated to no small degree by an underlying cause: the
combination of economic and political gains that it made during the 1990s
and the clear and continuing threat to these gains.

Threatening talk against the DPRK emerged in the United States during
the 2000 presidential campaign of George W. Bush, who continued to use the
term “rogue state” to refer to North Korea despite the Clinton administra-
tion’s decision in June 2000 to expunge the term from the foreign policy
lexicon. Bush also singled out Kim Jong Il by name in multiple stump
speeches. A year after his inauguration, in his January 2002 State of the
Union Address, President Bush made an ex cathedra pronouncement that
the DPRK was a charter member of the “axis of evil,” appropriating and
upgrading North Korea’s national identity from rogue state to evil state.

Although there is no disagreement between Beijing and Washington on the
need for a nuclear-free North Korea, China promptly issued an early
warning within days of the 2002 US State of the Union address, declaring
that “consequences will be very serious if [the United States] proceeds with
this kind of logic.”

While Bush manned the ramparts of rhetoric, administration hawks were
actively augmenting the aggressiveness of US military doctrine. From the
Pentagon came the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) of 2001, calling for
a paradigm shift from threat-based to capability-based models, and the
Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of 2002, that listed China and North Korea
as two of its seven target countries. The subtext of the QDR here seems
obvious – that the Pentagon and its allies in East Asia need to think seriously
about how to develop superior capabilities to deal with rising Chinese power.\textsuperscript{34} Moreover, the NPR explicitly contradicted the US-DPRK Agreed Framework, which declares that “the United States will provide formal assurances to the DPRK, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the United States.” The NPR and the contemporaneous US decision to pursue the development of a new generation of small “usable” nuclear weapons were blows to the much-touted nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime – specifically Article VI – and they go a long way toward explaining Pyongyang’s persistent and seemingly non-negotiable demand in the latest nuclear standoff for a non-aggression treaty or a security-assurance pledge in legally binding form. Throughout its term, the Bush administration seems to have accomplished an (un)diplomatic “mission impossible” by turning creeping unilateralism into runaway unilateralism. It rejected multilateral treaties or treaties-in-the-making, asserted a doctrine of preventive war widely decried as unnecessarily hostile and a violation of both international law and the UN Charter,\textsuperscript{35} and announced its effective disregard of the Geneva Conventions through its treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo and Iraq.

One month following Pyongyang’s October 2002 alleged confession – the so-called “mother of all confessions” – about its secret HEU program, the United States imposed on KEDO its unilateral decision to stop monthly heavy fuel oil shipments despite appeals from Tokyo and Seoul not to do so. The supply of heavy fuel oil was reportedly the only one of the four articles of the Agreed Framework that the United States had ever respected.\textsuperscript{36} Not widely recognized in the United States – and indeed, widely ignored – is that on 25 October 2002, the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a comprehensive and authoritative statement detailing its version of what had actually occurred in the Kelly–Kang exchanges behind the scenes a few weeks earlier, and also describing the “grand bargain” offered by the North Korean negotiators to US Assistant Secretary of the State James Kelly:

The DPRK, with greatest magnanimity, clarified that it was ready to seek a negotiated settlement of this issue on the following three conditions: firstly, if the U.S. recognizes the DPRK’s sovereignty; secondly, if it assures the DPRK of nonaggression; and thirdly, if the US does not hinder the economic development of the DPRK . . . If the U.S. legally assures the DPRK of nonaggression, including the nonuse of nuclear weapons against it by concluding . . . a treaty, the DPRK will be ready to clear the former of its security concerns.\textsuperscript{37}

There were no explicit calls for financial compensation from the United States. Subsequent North Korean pronouncements essentially adhered to the proposals outlined in the 25 October statement.\textsuperscript{38}

In any event, two weeks later, Pyongyang responded to this interruption of its energy supply by threatening to reactivate the Yongbyon nuclear plant
and then removing International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring devices from the plant. In December, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned North Korea not to try to take advantage of the US preoccupation with Iraq, since the United States was able and willing to fight and win two wars at the same time if necessary. To intensify and accelerate this downward spiral, the DPRK expelled the remaining IAEA inspectors from the country, noted its intent to restart a nuclear processing plant, and then withdrew from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

With war rhetoric and actions growing in the United States in late 2002 and early 2003, China became deeply afraid of the instability that could result from this vicious cycle of mutual provocation. China was alarmed both by the possibility of US recklessness in trying to resolve the North Korean nuclear challenge through military means à la Iraq and also by North Korea's possible calculation that, for reasons of regime survival, lashing out – to preempt America's preemptive strike, as it were – was a rational course of action, even if victory were impossible. For example, Shi Yinhong argued in early 2003 that China's external strategic environment had been fundamentally altered, and he predicted three worst-case scenarios: (1) North Korean nuclear blackmail directed at China; (2) Japan going nuclear; and (3) a US-DPRK war. The prescriptive conclusion was that China had to move away from tactical maneuvering toward grand strategic restructuring and reprioritization that would probably precipitate regime change in North Korea. While it seems apparent that a majority of PRC analysts reject such a hard-line approach, the fact that Shi was allowed to publicly present his position shows how the impending and then the actual war against Iraq contributed to changing the geopolitical milieu from a decade ago.

Another Chinese commentator, Shen Jiru, suggested that China needed to revise its 1961 Friendship and Cooperation Treaty with the DPRK, erasing the content related to a mutual defense alliance. According to Shen, the Chinese position in solving the DPRK nuclear standoff is clear: the Korean peninsula must become and remain non-nuclear; the DPRK should not have withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), as that treaty is structured to meet the common benefit of international society; the security interests of the DPRK should be satisfied; and crisis escalation must be prevented. Shen argued that revising the 1961 treaty would be a step toward eliminating nuclear weapons from the peninsula and would not tangibly affect either Chinese or North Korean relations with the United States.

That said, however, Shi and Shen, more than any other Chinese analysts, seem to have led many American journalists and on-the-fly interlocutors to conclude that Beijing's top priority was to prevent Pyongyang from going nuclear. This perception of China's primary concerns about North Korea's nuclear program is mistaken. China's greatest priority has been peace and stability on the Korean peninsula, which is a key contributor to peace and stability within China. History and geography have combined to make North Korea a crucial element in China's near-abroad security and domestic
stability, particularly in the border areas. North-east China already is home to Korea’s largest diaspora, and the region suffers from extremely high rates of unemployment, stagnating state-owned enterprises and industries, and low economic growth. In the event of war or regime collapse, North Korean refugees would flow into these Chinese borderlands, complicating the security-cum-stability interdependence of the PRC and the DPRK. For the Chinese leadership and most Chinese strategic analysts, while the idea of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula is important, the survival of the North Korean regime and the reform of North Korea are China’s greatest challenge and prime objective respectively. So it was not so much North Korea’s nuclear program per se as the clear and present danger of Pyongyang being next on the US hit list that spurred Beijing into action.

The US invasion and occupation of Iraq beginning in March 2003 demonstrated to the Chinese and the North Koreans alike that the changes in Washington were more than just rhetoric. China officially opposed the war, calling for an end to hostilities and a return to diplomatic solutions throughout the conflict, but its criticisms were reserved and far from belligerent. According to Shi Yinhong, the Iraq War led to the overcoming of government fragmentation and an internal “stalemate in the Chinese position”: “Now there is some recognition of a possible time-sequence in the US approach to North Korea, and that has created a sense of urgency in China.” As if offering evidence of the hypothesized timeline, the United States sent twenty-four long-range bombers to Guam in early March as a “message” to the North Koreans. During the run-up to the war in Iraq, the well-informed New Yorker reporter Seymour Hersh quoted an administration insider on Kim Jong Il:

Bush and Cheney want that guy’s head on a platter. Don’t be distracted by all this talk about negotiations. There will be negotiations, but they have a plan, and they are going to get this guy after Iraq. He’s their version of Hitler.

The events in Iraq, in effect, forced the Chinese leadership to set aside internal differences and figure out the most efficient path for protecting regional stability.

Actions within the US Defense Department after the war served to add fuel to the DPRK’s fire of paranoia. In April 2003, news leaked out that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld had circulated a memorandum proposing that the United States ally itself with China to isolate and bring about a collapse of the North Korean regime. The Chinese were hardly encouraged by their incorporation into the US imperial plan. Nor were they heartened by the zero-sum footing taken by the United States during the Three-Party Talks in Beijing in April 2003.

It took the Chinese little time to realize that the CVID mantra is a regime-change strategy in all but name. It is a strategy ready-made for
dismantling not only the North Korean regime but also the Clinton administration’s Perry process. Recall that in response to North Korea’s launching of a Taepodong-i missile in August 1998, President Bill Clinton drafted his former Secretary of Defense William Perry to conduct a thorough review and assessment of US policy toward North Korea. The Perry Report, issued in October 1999, noted the centrality of the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework and called for a two-track approach of step-by-step comprehensive engagement and normalization with a concurrent posture of deterrence. As if to presage the coming of the Bush evil-state strangulation strategy and the paradigm shift from deterrence to compellence, the Perry Report stressed that a policy of regime change and demise – “a policy of undermining the DPRK, seeking to hasten the demise of the regime of Kim Jong Il” – was one of four policy options considered but then rejected. Unsurprisingly, Congressional Republicans immediately attacked the Perry Report. The report of the North Korea Advisory Group, chaired by Representative Benjamin Gilman (R-NY), described the Clinton administration’s policies as tantamount to appeasement and claimed that the DPRK was undeniably a larger threat than it had been before the Agreed Framework. Whereas the issuance of the Perry Report and the implementation of some of its recommendations had led to a lessening of the tense atmosphere, China was now realizing that the Bush administration – implementing the Bush Doctrine – had no apparent qualms about pushing and prodding the Kim Jong Il regime toward disintegration.

In May 2003, another aggressive US sanctions strategy gained public attention: the Pentagon’s Operations Plan 5030, which described a variety of harassment and intimidation strategies that could be applied against North Korea. The eleven-nation Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), announced during the same month, established coordinated interception of cargo shipments for inspection and the possibility of an air and naval blockade/sanctions regime. Against the ominous backdrop of these proclamations, China successfully made its big push for the first round of Six-Party Talks.

In addition to the proximate cause of the Bush Doctrine as manifested in the Iraq War, China also found itself in a changed geopolitical and geo-economic situation in 2002–3. Chinese foreign relations were in a state of disarray in 1993–94 in both Sino-DPRK relations (because of China’s switch from a pro-DPRK to a two-Koreas policy) and Sino-American relations (because of fallout from the Tiananmen incident). Beijing commanded little geopolitical or geo-economic leverage with either the United States or North Korea. This situation persisted until the late 1990s when Beijing and Pyongyang began to mend fences and China was emerging almost overnight as the world’s fastest growing economy and the world’s third-largest trading nation.

Serving as catalyst for the process of repairing the strained relationship was a set of threatening developments involving the United States that
predated the Bush Doctrine. China was alarmed by both the new Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation and the growing US-Japanese cooperation in the development of the theater missile defense (TMD) system. But it was really the US/NATO air war against Yugoslavia in defense of Kosovo, including the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, which gave rise in China to images of a United States bent on global hegemony through the containment of China. The United States threatened to establish a dangerous precedent for neo-interventionism in bypassing the UN Security Council to wage the Kosovo war, lowering the threshold for the use of force and replacing or trampling state sovereignty as the core principle of international relations.55 According to one Chinese security analyst, the war caused “a shift in Chinese thinking on the matter of tolerance for U.S. forces in Asia. China now [felt] surrounded by the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances.”56 North Korea, in turn, was worried that it could be the next Yugoslavia. The year 1999, therefore, saw the exchange of high-profile delegations between the PRC and the DPRK and new promises of aid from China to North Korea.

China's Korea policy must also be understood in a larger context of its grand strategic goals. Domestic, regional, and global levels interact as China pursues three overarching demands and goals. The first is economic development, with an eye to enhancing domestic stability and legitimacy. China’s fourth-generation leadership now officially proclaimed the maintenance of domestic stability – the successful establishment of a “well-off society” (xiaokang shehui) – as the single greatest challenge in the years ahead. The second aim is the promotion of a peaceful and secure external environment free from threats to China’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. History and geography have combined to make North Korea a cordon sanitaire for China against the US military presence in Korea and, in the larger historical sense, against Japanese expansionism. Finally, the third overarching goal is the cultivation of China’s status as a responsible great power in international politics.57

China spent the 1990s advancing toward these goals and wants to protect its gains. The dangerous confrontation between the neighbor – the DPRK, an ally often called in the past “as close as lips to teeth” – and the global hegemon, the United States, is currently the dominant threat to this “inter-mestic” challenge of maintaining regional stability in order to promote the establishment of a stable, orderly, and healthy society. Unlike the Balkans or the Middle East where distance allows China the luxury of remaining relatively detached, the second US-DPRK nuclear conflict threatens not only to undercut China’s new international stature, but also to besmirch the domestic political claims of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as the leaders of a proudly resurgent China. A solution imposed by the United States would also result in a changed military situation that would constitute major geostrategic gains for Washington at Beijing’s expense. Beijing, therefore, has strong incentives to forestall a military resolution of any Korean crisis or conflict.58
In contrast to the Bush administration’s treaty-smashing unilateralism, China has become increasingly multilateral in the post-Cold War era. There has been a dramatic increase in Beijing’s participation in UN-sponsored multilateral treaties and regimes. And Beijing has undertaken a series of policy shifts on a wide range of world-order issues, including arms control and disarmament, UN peacekeeping operations, global trade, human rights, and environmental protection. Whereas Beijing had signed about 10–20 percent of all arms control agreements it was eligible to sign in 1970, this figure had jumped to 85–90 percent by 1996. Much of this cooperative behavior had to do with China’s determined drive to be seen as a responsible great power.59 Yet while the United States increases its military spending, contemplates new uses for nuclear weapons, and invades countries in the Middle East, the Bush administration’s National Security Strategy claims, as earlier noted, that China’s pursuit of increased military capabilities is an “outdated path.” Although the Chinese government has announced a succession of large peacetime increases in military spending since 1989, an alarmist interpretation of China’s increased military expenditures is not justified for several reasons. Chinese leaders pursue military modernization as a long-term goal rather than as an urgent requirement, and increased military spending in recent years went mostly to fund military personnel expenses and maintenance and operations. Moreover, the military expenditure/GDP ratio is lower than that of all major powers and its neighboring countries, with the exception of Japan. Finally, there is every indication that Chinese leaders are determined not to repeat the Soviet strategic blunder of placing an unbearable defense burden on its economy by spending too much on its military forces.

To summarize the proximate and long-term or underlying causes, China’s proactive diplomacy has been shaped by and keyed tightly to the level of risk inherent in the aggressive Bush Doctrine, and this is in large part due to changes in China’s position in the East Asian region since the end of the Cold War. In short, the unique confluence of both proximate and underlying factors – greater danger, greater leverage, and greater stakes – explains why Beijing was spurred into action in early 2003.

Assessing China’s role and influence

Understanding and assessing China’s role in the US-DPRK nuclear standoff requires, first, an understanding of China’s own characterization of its role. China has used the phrase “active mediation” to define its role in the Six-Party Talks. In international law and practice, mediation is a well-known procedure to achieve the peaceful settlement of an international dispute. According to Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi,

Conducting active mediation means continually making positive efforts to promote peace and talks in an objective and just attitude and see to it
that all parties will enhance contacts, build trust, seek common grounds while reserving differences, and expand consensus.\textsuperscript{60}

As if to check and contain any undue expectations, Wang Yi asserts that “China is not the dominating factor on the issue and the key was not China’s hand,” adding that China’s role is to promote the process of peaceful talks, putting forward a middle course when the talks come to a deadlock.\textsuperscript{61}

Wang Yi suggests four tasks for the mediation effort. The first, enhancing contacts, is one for which China has earned high marks. It is, indeed, unlikely that the Six-Party Talks could have gotten off first base without Beijing’s vigorous shuttle diplomacy. On the second task, building trust, China would be the first to admit that it has done less well, although this is not unexpected, given a half-century of enmity and distrust between the United States and the DPRK. On the other hand, China has done remarkably well in building trust among China, South Korea, Russia, and even Japan, undermining the Bush administration’s “multilateral” attempt to bring about a united regional front against the DPRK. The third and fourth tasks are seeking common ground while reserving differences (qiutong cunyi) and expanding group consensus. China’s patient and persistent efforts in these areas have moved the five countries slowly but steadily toward Pyongyang’s simultaneous action proposal – and some say that in the third round of the Six-Party Talks even the Bush administration began to budge.

To mediate between a unilateral America and a unilateral North Korea is, ultimately, a difficult challenge for any third party. It may be doubly so for China for several reasons. First, the Chinese leadership is not known for its mediation skills or diplomacy. Second, the conservative nature of Chinese diplomacy makes it difficult for Beijing to play a proactive mediating role in the resolution of any international crisis, let alone a crisis between China’s socialist ally, which commands the “tyranny of proximity,” and the world’s lone superpower, which also happens to be China’s largest trading partner. One senior official acknowledged, “We generally only propose things that we are sure will be accepted.”\textsuperscript{62} Finally, mutual distrust and loathing between George W. Bush and Kim Jong Il are such that it would take new leadership in Washington and/or Pyongyang to bring the two countries to a new, constructive starting point.\textsuperscript{63}

As explained above, the United States has had high hopes throughout the second standoff that China would play a decisive role in pushing the North Korean regime toward nuclear dismantlement. But China’s leverage is not as great in Pyongyang as some US foreign policymakers and pundits believe. At the same time, Chinese leverage over North Korea is greater than it is over American policy. Beijing’s mediating role, then, is constrained by high expectations on the part of the United States, expectations directly undercut by the insistence on CVID, and a low level of influence over the Bush administration.
Beijing, by cajoling and coaxing with food and oil aid, has managed to bring Pyongyang to the Six-Party Talks, overcoming or at least altering North Korea’s principled stand for direct bilateral negotiation with the United States. China also may have played a critical behind-the-scenes role in persuading Pyongyang not to undertake any provocative rhetoric or action. North Korea has not carried out threatened nuclear testing and has not launched a Taepodong-II missile. (The Berlin Agreement of September 1999 included a moratorium on Taepodong-II missile launches while US-DPRK talks are underway.) China also played a role in downsizing Pyongyang’s demand for a non-aggression treaty that initially called for a security pledge or guarantee and the removal of the DPRK from the US list of terrorist states. The compromise is a call for a return to the US-DPRK Joint Communiqué of October 2000, which states inter alia that the two sides “are prepared to undertake a new direction in their relations” and “that neither government would have hostile intent toward the other,” such that the two countries would “make every effort in the future to build a new relationship free from past enmity.”

The application of leverage through aid, however, is a double-edged sword. Previously, China viewed aid as a natural part of its fraternal relationship with the DPRK. Now, the Chinese government sees aid as a pragmatic device for preventing the collapse of the Pyongyang regime and coaxing whatever concessions possible out of Kim Jong Il. Beijing has become more deeply involved each year, playing a crucial role in the politics of regime survival by providing more aid in a wider variety of forms: direct government-to-government aid, subsidized cross-border trade, and private barter transactions.

Despite being Pyongyang’s external life-support system, especially since November 2002 when the United States halted monthly delivery of heavy fuel oil, China does not receive as much North Korean gratitude as it would like nor wield as much leverage as Washington believes, precisely because Pyongyang knows that China’s aid is in its own self-interest. As one senior Chinese leader said to a visiting US scholar in the context of expressing China’s opposition to any economic sanctions on North Korea, “We can either send food to North Korea or they will send refugees to us – either way, we feed them. It is more convenient to feed them in North Korea than in China.”

Beijing is cautious to a fault for fear of provoking and/or causing collapse in the North by withholding too much aid, since that event would bring a host of destabilizing social, economic, and political consequences.

Just as Mao demanded and resented Soviet aid for China’s nuclear development, first Kim Il Sung and now Kim Jong Il have demanded and also resented Chinese aid. Indeed, Pyongyang’s seeming inability to reconstruct its national identity in the face of a changing geopolitical context has engendered intense behind-the-scenes bargaining amid an atmosphere of mutual suspicion. In every high-level meeting between the two governments, North
Korean requests for economic aid dominate the agenda. Recent estimates of China’s aid are in the range of 1 million tons of wheat and rice and 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil per annum, accounting for 70 to 90 percent of North Korea’s fuel imports and about one-third of its total food imports. This is estimated to comprise one-quarter to one-third of China’s overall foreign aid. With the cessation of the US heavy fuel oil delivery, China’s oil aid and exports may now be approaching nearly 100 percent of North Korea’s energy imports.

In addition to the problems of gaining material leverage in Pyongyang, Beijing also faces a normative hurdle. This is the notion of nuclear fairness and justice. If nuclear weapons are necessary for China’s deterrence and status, and if Israel, India, and Pakistan can get away with building a nuclear weapons program by dint of not signing the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), why is the same not true for North Korea? Beijing cannot capture the high moral ground in pushing too vigorously for the unilateral nuclear disarmament of an insecure hermit kingdom in its strategic buffer zone. After all, when China unveiled its nuclear capabilities in 1964, it was the result of a nuclear program undertaken with direct reference to the superpowers. The PRC believed that a China without the bomb would not count and could not really stand up in world politics. Foreign Minister Chen Yi said that China had to build the bomb at any cost, “even if the Chinese had to pawn their trousers.”

Even today, China understands the cachet that comes with being a nuclear power. Because of the belief that sufficient military power buys both deterrence and status, China is going through internal debates about acquiring more and better high-tech weapons systems, including nuclear weapons. A June 2003 poll conducted by a Chinese nonprofit organization showed that approximately half of the citizen respondents believed that sovereign nations have the right to develop nuclear weapons, and approximately 90 percent criticized Washington’s tactics regarding North Korea. Echoing a public statement of former premier Zhu Rongji in 1999 that North Korea as a sovereign state had every right to pursue a nuclear program, one PRC caller to a live television program said, “Isn’t it true that all the current nuclear powers did not feel they needed the permission of others to become nuclear? Why should North Korea need the permission of the United States?”

The other side of this coin is that the nuclear powers are obligated by treaty to work toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. Referring more to the United States and its Western allies than to China, IAEA director general Mohamed El Baradei asserts that the nuclear powers pressuring countries like North Korea to forgo nuclear arms are clinging to the same weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as the centerpiece of their own security, despite pledges made more than thirty years ago in the NPT to reduce their dependence on them. He says that it is time for states to “abandon the unworkable notion that it is morally reprehensible for some countries to pursue nuclear weapons but morally acceptable for others to rely on
The maintenance of nuclear arsenals by the United States – but also by the PRC – therefore provides a logic by which the North Korean regime can seek its own.

If China’s influence in North Korea seems limited, it is important to keep in mind that Beijing has a far greater ability to effect change in Pyongyang than in Washington. China’s leverage over Washington is constrained by an extremely high trade dependency on the United States. Sino-US trade reached $231.4 billion in 2004, making China the third largest trading partner of the United States (after Canada and Mexico but ahead of Japan and Germany), even as the US trade deficit with China grew to $162 billion in 2004, making it the largest bilateral trade deficit in US history. This continued economic relationship can make or break China’s accelerated march to the promised land of great powerdom. And the United States is making the link between geopolitical and geo-economic issues well known. In a 2004 report to Congress, the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission warned, “The extent of Chinese cooperation in those [six-party] negotiations to achieve a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs is a critical test of the U.S.-China relationship.” In 2005, Washington shifted from urging Beijing to press Pyongyang to return to the Six-Party Talks to asking Beijing to take some specific punitive sanctions measures against Pyongyang.

China’s influence over US policy also runs up against CVID. The dogged US insistence on CVID as its only “offer” in negotiations is an expression of a fundamentalist quest for absolute security, the product of a Manichean worldview where something is either good or bad and there are no shades of gray. Seen in the context of Pyongyang’s historical anxieties, CVID is nothing short of an evil-state strangulation (regime-change) strategy; most clear-eyed observers, including those in China, would agree with this perception. As Gavan McCormack reminds us,

While in Washington the North Korean nuclear threat has been a major issue for the past decade, in Pyongyang the US nuclear threat has been the issue for the past fifty years. North Korea’s uniqueness in the nuclear age lies first of all in the way it has faced and lived under the shadow of nuclear threat for longer than any other nation.

Beyond its internal contradictions, the CVID stance is also a quest for an impossible past-perfect, present-perfect, and future-perfect verification regime. As Avery Goldstein sharply argues, it will be nearly impossible to craft an arms control agreement that guarantees this level of perfection, allowing unfettered free access to any facility, anytime, anywhere within a sovereign state’s borders. This high standard, elusive even among parties that trust each other, is one at which even the most open and democratic states balk. In both its actions and negotiating stances, the Bush administration leaves little room for the PRC to influence change.
By early 2004, China had come to reject the Bush administration contention that North Korea had an HEU-based nuclear weapons program. In the June run-up to the third round of Six-Party Talks, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Zhou Wenzhong openly challenged Washington’s repeated claims that North Korea had been trying to build HEU-based nuclear bombs, urging the Bush administration to stop making charges about the HEU program unless it could offer more conclusive evidence. What is rather remarkable about this open disagreement with Washington is its indication of Beijing’s growing frustration with the all-or-nothing CVID approach. While acknowledging that both the United States and the DPRK needed to compromise, China was insisting that the burden fell more heavily on the United States. Zhou even admitted that Beijing was now edging closer to agreement with Pyongyang on the all-or-nothing nature of CVID and the US conflation of military and civilian nuclear programs.

There are several reasons why China has come to openly challenge the Bush administration’s repeated claims about North Korea’s HEU program. First, Beijing is taking a free ride on the global wave of anti-Americanism (more precisely, anti-Bushism) and the global wave of disbelief in US intelligence about WMD, both related to the Iraq War. Second, China feels more confident about the emerging coalition of the willing in North-east Asia moving away from the Bush administration’s approach and toward Beijing’s preferred approach of a functional “peace by pieces” – the incremental and mutually reciprocal “words for words” and “action for action” approach implied in the abovementioned Statement – that resulted from the third round of the Six-Party Talks. Finally, Beijing’s open challenge reflects China’s concern that the Six-Party Talks could collapse unless there is dismantlement or at least some chipping away of the CVID formula (i.e., disassociating a plutonium-based nuclear weapons program from an HEU program) – by sleight of hand if necessary.

At the third round of Six-Party Talks, the United States appeared to step slightly away from the CVID mantra, offering the possibility that China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia might be able to send energy supplies to North Korea in exchange for Pyongyang’s cooperation. Nonetheless, this highly conditional offer seemed in some ways more like a repacking of CVID rather than a basic departure from it, and the talks ended without any real forward movement. That said, however, compared to the rigid stand taken a year earlier, the offer can be regarded as an indication of Washington’s situation-specific and time-specific willingness to move forward from the dead center of CVID. In the fourth round of talks in July 2005, Washington put less emphasis on the CVID language, while still adhering to the basic CVID formula, and continued to show greater flexibility in negotiating approach toward the DPRK. The question, then, is whether or not Beijing can find the right moment and the right method of getting the United States to move even further away from a non-negotiable stance.
The role that Beijing played in trying to change or at least modify the CVID stance can be considered an indirect mediating role. China allowed other parties – South Korea, Russia, and Japan – to do all the heavy lifting in the progressive trimming of the CVID mantra. In fact, the Bush administration was forced to come up with a more reasonable and negotiable proposal in the face of three constraining factors: (1) the mind-numbing and attention-diverting effect of the Bush administration's self-generated quagmire in Iraq; (2) subtle pressure from Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro and not-so-subtle pressure from Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow that Washington had to be more reasonable and forthcoming in the third round of talks; and (3) even greater political pressure from Bush insiders to get the North Korean nuclear issue off the presidential electoral calendar (since one neo-imperialist war was all the Bush administration could afford in a presidential electoral year). In effect, both Beijing and Pyongyang, therefore, have become unintended beneficiaries of the Bush administration's self-inflicted foreign policy disaster in the Middle East.

Still, China has little capacity to maneuver the US position to its liking. This implies that Beijing will most likely have to continue its current level and type of involvement in the nuclear dispute. The Chinese do not seem to be worried about the continuation or prolongation of the process, probably because as long as a process is still in place neither the United States nor the DPRK will make any rash moves. Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing said, “The road is long and bumpy. But time is on our side. Time is on the side of peace.”78 With its position in Iraq becoming more and more of a quagmire, the United States can hardly afford a disaster in North-east Asia, a fact that increases both North Korean and Chinese bargaining leverage in trying to chart a non-violent course with the United States.

Toward a common security system

A decade ago, as the first nuclear standoff between the United States and the DPRK was being negotiated, few would have predicted the role that China would play in a future standoff. Yet factors coalesced in such a way in 2003–4 that China saw fit to take a large role in trying to resolve the second US-DPRK nuclear dispute. Today, China finds itself in the unique position of having both the United States and North Korea looking to it for a way out of the box of their mutual creation. Pressed by the North Koreans for more and more aid and by the United States for unilateral nuclear dismantle-ment in Pyongyang, China has so far dealt deftly with these twin pressures, pushing forward the Six-Party Talks and working to prevent any calamitous outcome on the Korean peninsula. However, this unexpected trajectory should alert us to the unpredictable nature of the US-PRC-DPRK triangle, a strategic grouping with three disparate, sometimes fickle actors pursuing strategic interests that are far from ideological or material alignment. The
future of China’s role in the US-DPRK nuclear standoff and in US-Korea relations in general, therefore, is not predetermined but rather malleable, subject to a host of intervening variables.

Given this prospect for change, outside actors, ranging from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to concerned scholars, have a responsibility to work toward a more peaceable equilibrium among these complex and contentious triangular relations, a challenge that has become more urgent and problematic with the reelection of George Bush. The relevant epistemic community, in other words, still has a space in which to influence Chinese and US policymakers and possibly North Korean ones as well. The preceding analysis suggests the importance of a reorientation of viewpoints: US policymakers should proceed from a standpoint of common security in order to deal with the North Korean nuclear challenge.

The common security approach follows several core assumptions and axioms. First of all, it is an Apollonian vision of common human destiny. In an objective sense, the global–local linkage is not a matter of theoretical invention; it is empirical reality. Security in the nuclear-ecological age can only mean common security. Any fair security framework must address the legitimate concerns and interests of all its members. Common security takes on special significance and urgency in the context of the divided Korean peninsula, given its position as a sensitive flashpoint and strategic pivot. In this environment, as elsewhere, true humanism (and common sense) recognize the ineluctable truth that there has never been and never can be absolute security in human life. The pursuit of absolute national security through military means or through Bush’s evil-state strangulation strategy can only strengthen North Korea’s resolve to go nuclear. The common-security approach breaks away from the vicious and deadly logic of interactive security dilemmas. The quest for absolute security is a sure recipe for nuclear proliferation.

The issue of North Korea’s nuclear program cannot be settled without addressing the country’s legitimate security needs and fears in strategically and economically credible ways, that is, with the right mix of security assurances and economic benefits that have become Pyongyang’s bottom line. Indeed, such security assurances and economic inducements from Washington have helped to convince South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Libya to abandon nuclear armament. The former Soviet Union, under the Nunn-Lugar aid program, has dismantled many of its weapons, and Ukraine – which possessed some 1,900 Soviet nuclear warheads – agreed to get rid of them all in exchange for security assurances, economic support, and energy assistance. These successes should serve as inspiration for a policy of positive inducements and should indicate the importance of providing meaningful security guarantees to replace those associated with the possession of nuclear weapons.
More specifically, the US government must abandon the approach in which it seeks to have its nuclear cake and eat it, too (i.e., the CVID tactic of demanding everything and offering nothing). As the common-security approach relies on recognizing the interrelations and interdependencies among countries, the United States must step back and assess the moral and practical nature of its commandment “do as I say, not as I do” when it comes to the subject of nuclear weapons. In place of these unidirectional “negotiating” strategies, the United States must apply a simultaneous and synergistic approach – the functional “peace by pieces” approach – that will allow China to aid in the resolution of the conflict and move beyond its role as firefighter.

“Peace by pieces,” in functional international theory, refers to a system of multiple functional channels, the pieces of which can be seen as the organic elements of the gradual social and economic integration of the two Koreas, leading slowly to a working peace system. Such a functional approach, starting in the area of economics, could provide the desired popular pressure or spillover effects to keep the on-again, off-again Six-Party Talks alive while stimulating the opening of more and more channels of informal communication and exchange in related areas. If a more stable and peaceful order is to emerge on the Korean peninsula, cooperative connections and linkages sensitive to the requirements of common security will have to be established in different but interrelated issue areas and at different systemic levels. The working-peace-system approach, therefore, is premised upon the creative interplay of new understandings and new opportunities opening up in the post-Cold War North-east Asian security environment. It is also premised on the belief that no single perspective or pathway is sufficient.

In both the academic world and the policy and punditry world (in China as well as the United States), there is a tendency to forget that state interests are often in flux, susceptible to self-fulfilling prophecies via their impact upon other states’ behavior. Yet the implications of naming the DPRK as a rogue state or an evil state are profound in both epistemic and policymaking communities. In the policy world, the implications can lead to actions that produce the outcomes they are designed to avoid. Very few mainstream policymakers and on-the-fly pundits bother to make any effort to study the interactive dynamics of security dilemmas – that is, the impact of Washington’s rogue-state demonization strategy on the shaping of Pyongyang’s security thinking and behavior. The impact of threat perceptions has been largely obscured by the highly technical, specialized discourse of mainstream “realist” security analysts with their one-sided focus on Pyongyang’s intentions and capabilities. This focus leads to the inevitable attribution of responsibility for the current “crisis” solely to North Korean words and deeds. With the demise of any hopes for a “regime change” in Washington and the re-election of George W. Bush as one of the worst – and most dangerous – presidents in US history, it is unlikely that the current
administration will backtrack on its Manichean definitions. The idea that the United States would deal with states as they are on a particular issue and not as they are perceived to be at some non-pragmatic level of moralistic abstraction has suffered a lethal blow.

At a material level, the challenge for the uncertain years ahead lies in seeking a greater synergy among many state and non-state actors in order to collaborate for more effective prevention, regulation, and resolution of the simmering nuclear conflict on the Korean peninsula, the strategic vortex of North-east Asian geopolitics. The states of North-east Asia must simultaneously expand multilateral dialogues and economic integration as vehicles for order-building and problem-solving. The US-DPRK dispute risks derailing burgeoning regionalism in North-east Asia, yet it is exactly this regionalism that will help prevent future spirals like that which has marked both standoffs between the United States and North Korea over nuclear weapons.

In fact, the ongoing Six-Party Talks also offer an opportunity to produce something larger than just resolution of the specific issue of North Korea’s nuclear program. Not only is multilateralism now an integral part of China’s new security concept, but it is also a useful instrument for Chinese conflict-management diplomacy. Therefore, we should seize the twin historical opportunities of China’s rising multilateralism and its initiation of the Six-Party Talks in the interests of forming and institutionalizing a truly North-east Asian security regime as China has explicitly suggested by proposing the institutionalization of the Six-Party Talks. Doing so, however, requires that the United States contribute to the usefulness of the multilateral forum by negotiating in a fair and productive manner.

China’s role in the nuclear standoff has been – and will continue to be – motivated by its strategic interests of maintaining stability in the region so as to protect its recent economic gains. Given the fundamental incorrectness of US assumptions, a policy change, indeed an entire reconceptualization of the North Korean quandary, is in order. One component will be recognition of the impact of the peculiar historic and strategic circumstances out of which North Korea’s nuclear ambitions have evolved. This is not to justify or rationalize the odious North Korean regime, but it can provide a more realistic point of departure for common-security engagement and the resolution of the US-DPRK nuclear standoff. It is necessary that the United States recognize the contingencies of security for China and North Korea and that it negotiate in good faith toward a common solution providing common security through the fair exchange of security guarantees for nuclear dismantlement.

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Notes
4 Author’s interview with Dr. Choi Young-jin, Deputy Director of KEDO, New York, 22 April 1998. China, in fact, saw the Agreed Framework as providing several opportunities to stabilize the situation in North-east Asia. It would, the Chinese believed, improve economic conditions in North Korea, bolster the legitimacy of the Kim Jong Il regime, and enhance the prospects of political stability, helping to alleviate the dangerous imbalance of power between the two Koreas.
13 On the relationship between Hu Jintao’s election and China’s proactive diplomacy, see Wang Jisi, op. cit.
14 The Chinese Foreign ministry acknowledged only that the reemergence of the nuclear question had “resulted in the tension of the Korean peninsula and wide concern of the international community,” and that “in order to facilitate its peaceful settlement, the Chinese side has invited the DPRK and the United States

15 Dai has had the most meetings with Kim Jong Il and is the closest to the North Korean Dear Leader of all Chinese officials.


17 See Wang Te-chun, “Special Dispatch.”


19 Reporting on the talks to the US Congress, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly said, “Our goal – complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of North Korean nuclear programs – has been dubbed by the South Koreans ‘CVID,’ and that acronym and the important goal it represents has been accepted by all but the North Koreans.” James Kelly, “Opening Remarks Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,” 2 March 2004; http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2004/30093.htm.


25 For the full English text of the Chairman’s Statement, see People’s Daily Online, 26 June 2004; http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200406/26/eng20040626_147642.html


30 For a wide-ranging discussion and debate on the new neo-conservative fundamentalism that is both cause and manifestation of the Bush Doctrine, see G. John Ikenberry, “The End of the Neo-conservative Moment,” Survival, vol. 46, no. 1, Spring 2004, pp. 7–22; Robert Jervis, “Understanding the Bush Doctrine,”
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38 It has also come to light that in the course of their visit to Pyongyang in October 2002, Donald Gregg, former US ambassador to South Korea, and Don Oberdorfer, former diplomatic correspondent for The Washington Post, were given a written personal message from Kim Jong Il to George W. Bush declaring: “If the United States makes a bold decision, we will respond accordingly.” Gregg and Oberdorfer delivered the message to senior officials at the White House only to be ignored. See Donald Gregg and Don Oberdorfer, “A Moment to Seize with North Korea,” The Washington Post, 22 June 2005, p. A21.


40 Shi Yinhong, op. cit.; see also Wang Te-chun, “Special Dispatch.”

41 A review of Chinese writings on North-east Asian security in general and the North Korean nuclear issue in particular has persuaded this writer that Shi Yinhong’s is a distinct minority dissenting view. See Wang Jisi, “China’s Changing Role in Asia,” p. 11; Jin Xide et al., “Chaoxian Wenti zai Yanjin” (The Evolution of the North Korean Question), Shijie Zhishi (World Knowledge), no. 6, 2003, pp. 14–18; and Meng Liu, “China and the North Korean Crisis: Facing Test and Transition,” Pacific Affairs, vol. 76, no. 3, Fall 2003, pp. 347–73. Moreover, by late August 2003 Shi’s view seems to have changed significantly, as he now had to admit that “the DPRK, no matter what its motives were, at least raised detailed proposals to be discussed . . . and these proposals were rational. In other words, the DPRK got the upper hand in this round of DPRK-U.S. diplomatic rivalry.” Quoted in Wang Te-chun, “The Results of the Six-Party Talks Are Better Than Expected,” Hong Kong Ta Kung Pao, 30 August 2003, trans. in FBIS-CHI-2003-0830, September 4, 2003.

China’s new role

43 Lampton and Ewing, op. cit., p. 60.
50 Thomas Schelling makes a useful distinction between deterrence (a strategy employing threats to preserve the status quo) and compellence (a strategy employing threats to alter the status quo), and he provides cogent reasons why the latter is often more difficult to implement successfully. See Thomas Schelling, Arms and Influence, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966, pp. 1–18, 35–43, 69–86.
53 Japan was the one and only Asian country in the original eleven-nation PSI grouping
57 For analysis along this line, see Wang Yizhou, “Mianxiang ershi shiji de Zhongguo waijiao: sanzhong xuqiu de xunqiu jiqi pingheng (China’s Diplomacy for the Twenty-First Century: Seeking and Balancing Three Demands),” Zhanlue yu guanli (Strategy and Management), no. 6, 1999, pp. 18–27.


During an interview with Bob Woodward, Bush is said to have jumped out of his seat declaring: “I loathe Kim Jong II! I have a visceral reaction to this guy, because he is starving his people.” Bob Woodward, Bush at War, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002, p. 340. Vice President Dick Cheney shares and amplifies Bush’s Kim Jong II – bashing, saying that America “does not negotiate with evil, we defeat it.” See also the passage from Seymour Hersh, op. cit.

Quoted in Lampton and Ewing, op. cit., p. 70.


David Shambaugh, op. cit., p. 46.


Lampton and Ewing, op. cit., p. 66.

Ibid.


As Albert O. Hirschman describes in his classic work, trade has an “influence effect”: where, as one country becomes dependent on trade with another country, the latter state has increasing influence in the policy design of the former state. With increased gains from trade comes increased vulnerability to this effect, and a state can avoid these vulnerabilities only if it has alternate markets at its disposal. Albert O. Hirschman, National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade, expanded edition, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980, Chapter 1.


Avery Goldstein, “The North Korean Nuclear Challenge and American Interests: Getting the Priorities Right,” 1 November 2003, distributed via e-mail from the Foreign Policy Research Institute, fpri@fpri.org.


Joseph Kahn and Susan Chira, “Chinese Official Challenges U.S. Stance on North Korea,” The New York Times, 9 June 2004, p. 12. It should be noted in this connection that there is a big difference between HEU ambitions and HEU capabilities. There is little doubt that Pyongyang has blueprints for HEU
weapons, but it does not have the specialized material, let alone the components and the independent power stations capable of delivering the constant supply of electricity necessary for operating thousands of gas centrifuges. See International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), North Korea’s Weapons Programmes: A Net Assessment, London: IISS, 2004, pp. 39–42.

78 Quoted in Cossa, “CVID, WMD, and Elections Galore,” p. 4.


82 For the most authoritative exposition of “classical functionalism” along this line, see David Mitrany, A Working Peace System, Chicago: Quadrangle, 1966.


84 Notable exceptions include Bleiker, op. cit., Leon Sigal, op. cit., McCormack, op. cit.; and Gurtov, op. cit.

85 Bleiker, op. cit., p. 721.

86 As Robert Litwak argues, it is regime intention more than regime type that is the critical indicator of a country’s decision to go nuclear. See Litwak, “Non-proliferation and the Dilemmas of Regime Change,” p.11.
The peoples of the Korean peninsula have had their share of tragedies. The most recent is the great famine of the 1990s that afflicted the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). Many North Koreans coped with their plight by fleeing, at least temporarily, northward to China. The existence of this substantial refugee population complicated an already difficult geopolitical situation and presented the international community with a troublesome humanitarian dilemma. Some have even compared the out-migration of North Koreans to the exodus of East Germans in 1989 that contributed to the collapse of the East German regime.

Given that the boundary between North Korea and China’s Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture cuts through a larger ethnic Korean community, it is not surprising that there has often been much cross-border migration. Since the mid-1990s, the flow of people northward has increased, due largely to North Korea’s desperate economic situation. But the issue of cross-border food seekers initially arose in the context of a migration in the opposite direction, from the PRC to North Korea, in the wake of China’s own famine of the early 1960s. As such, many ethnic Koreans on both sides of the border have come to believe that people who are “relatives” (sometimes literally, but at least in terms of ethnicity) have an obligation to those who have encountered difficult times. What the people view as honoring a social contract, however, the two governments see as a political threat.

While primarily a regional issue, this cross-border migration has become a political football in Washington. Some advocates have tried to attach the issue to a larger critique of North Korea. Others have restricted the focus to asylum and refugee questions. Whether in the United States or in North-east Asia, though, the heated debate over the movement of North Koreans into China has raised difficult policy questions, challenged the mandate of at least one major international organization, and affected tens of thousands of people on the ground.
Famine and exodus

Beginning in the early 1990s, the North Korean economy was hit by a “perfect storm”: the withdrawal of Russian support, the perpetuation of Stalinist economic policies after they had ceased to be viable, the breakdown in the food storage and rationing/distribution systems, and natural calamities such as flooding and drought. Year after year, both domestic production and foreign trade shrank. China’s continued supply of petroleum and food was no match for all the help that North Korea had formerly received from the Soviet Union.

The most serious fallout from the economic crisis was the famine. In 1993 food shortages became critical, and by 1995 the situation was desperate. The government distributed the limited amount of food, but not necessarily according to need. At least to some extent, the government skewed distribution to benefit certain favored groups: people in the showcase city of Pyongyang, workers in critical industries, officials (and perhaps party cadres), and soldiers. However, the extent to which favoritism has distorted the distribution system is a controversial issue. Some claims of favoritism may have been overstated. For example, even party members and other cadres appear to have been hit hard by the famine. At any rate, the national food distribution system largely ceased to serve the bulk of the population. Except for the favored sectors, probably less than one person in ten could rely on the official distribution system. Others had to buy or barter. Although the government once deemed markets “unsocialist” and at one point tried to shut them down, it ultimately tolerated such mechanisms as the only way to prevent further depopulation of urban areas, where the food situation was even worse than in the countryside. Even with the markets, the situation was dire.

It is difficult to ascertain how many North Koreans died during this famine, in part because so little data is available, but also because deaths, especially of the young and the elderly, tend to have multiple causes. Depending on the methodology used and assumptions made, the number of famine-related deaths in the mid-to late-1990s has been estimated at between 220,000 and 3.5 million. The larger estimates include people who died of communicable diseases after their immune systems had been compromised as a result of malnutrition. No mortality figures, of course, can take into account the suffering of those who did not die; acute malnutrition and wasting of body mass affected a large portion of the population.

After 1997, the death rate declined in part because of the natural cycle of famines (the weaker die first, leaving more food for the stronger) and in part because of the arrival of millions of tons of grain from China, Japan, South Korea, and (somewhat erratically) from the United States. The United States sent 100,000 tons of grain in 2003, but much smaller quantities since then. It is expected to send 50,000 tons in 2005. This modest quantity seems to represent a compromise between those in Washington who do not want to
do anything that might have the effect of propping up the regime and those who want to provide humanitarian aid while encouraging Pyongyang to participate in negotiations on strategic issues. Thus, American food policy has often been influenced by ideology and strategic considerations.

Some North Koreans received foreign-origin food directly, but much of it entered the country’s fledgling market economy (by fair means or foul), thus benefiting those best able to adjust to the new economic regime. The effect on those still functioning under the old, now collapsed, non-monetary economy has been more problematic. However, even the grain diverted by corrupt officials has often been sold, which has lowered the market price of food and enabled people to buy about a third more for the same amount of money.¹⁹

Famine generally results in migration to areas perceived as better supplied. Despite the efforts of the authorities in both China and Korea to prevent cross-border movements, the inevitable happened across the porous 1,400 km common frontier. Actually, the exodus from North Korea had begun even before the famine. Around 1995 most migrants were reasonably well-nourished males. At that time, China did not seem to have viewed them as a significant problem and did little to interfere. Then came the North Korean famine and the general collapse of the national economy, which greatly increased the numbers. Most came from the DPRK’s “rust belt,” in particular, North Hamgyong province. This once-industrialized province bordering on Russia and China was especially hard hit by the economic collapse that occurred in the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union. Pyongyang largely wrote off the increasingly impoverished North Hamgyong as an area to provide with food.

The famine affected the exodus in various ways. First, of course, was the quest for food. Additionally, the famine precipitated a breakdown in the North Korean administrative system, with work units often suspending their involvement in the distribution of food and allowing the black market to take over. In areas where the market did not meet people’s needs, some took advantage of the widespread breakdown in social controls, including border surveillance, and fled China. Thus, the famine made the emigration both necessary and possible. The famine also caused the demographic nature of the exodus to change, and by 1998 the majority of the migrant population consisted of women and children, all undernourished.

Over the years, this outflow has become more and more organized. Most migrants have originated in the North Korean provinces bordering China and have traveled to China overland: by transport until they get as close as possible to the Yalu or Tumen rivers, then going the rest of the way on foot. Upstream, the rivers are easy to cross, especially when the water is frozen. Downstream, where the rivers widen and deepen, the shores are better guarded, with Chinese military outposts on the north side and North Korean soldiers hidden on the south side. Around 2004, China tightened its border security reportedly to prevent North Korean troops from escaping into
China. A few North Koreans have arrived in China via the high seas, requiring expensive arrangements for boat access, thus adding to the already considerable cost of attempting to flee North Korea. However, even overland departures could be expensive, as most people have had to pay bribes to Korean soldiers. The going rate has been 500 won, typically three months salary.

Whatever their itinerary, the refuge seekers’ experiences en route have generally been harrowing. Though there are about seven different routes north, all finally involve crossing one of the two boundary rivers, usually the Tumen. As Human Rights Watch relates:

[T]heir description of the act of crossing the Tumen River was often the most emotionally fraught point of our interviews. Many found it a terrifying, near death experience, and to all it represented a decisive moment of separation when they crossed not only a national border, but the border between being a citizen and a criminal, or even a traitor. A man whose family transited to South Korea in a matter of months via a well-worn route prepared by heavy bribes was one of the few to describe the experience calmly. “The river was frozen, so it was easy. Everyone knows you can cross if you pay.” Those who crossed without assistance, however, found it traumatic. “It was very dangerous... because the water was running high. I thought I was going to die on my way to China.” “The river was not frozen, even in winter, because of wastewater from a Chinese factory. The water was chest-high. If I crossed the river, I would reach China, so I endured the coldness, even though it was as painful as cutting my flesh with a knife.”

Despite all the obstacles, a large number succeeded.

**China, the DPRK, and international human rights law**

Years before the exodus of North Koreans to China, the international community created a human rights regime with far-reaching provisions designed to protect those seeking refuge and asylum. With regard to the source state, leaving one’s country is a right enshrined in Article 12 of the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Receiving countries have various obligations spelled out in the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. China is a party to both.

The refugee convention defines a refugee as a person who, “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and... owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.” Article 33 of the Convention states that such people may not be returned to their country if they face danger there: “No Contracting State shall expel or return (refouler) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to
the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.\textsuperscript{15} Notwithstanding its obligations under the convention, China claims that it must, pursuant to a still secret Sino-Korean treaty of 1961 and subsequent protocols, return North Koreans who have entered China “illegally.” As one official explained in 2000, “lately, the North has been stepping up demands that we repatriate the North Koreans, especially those who are party members or political criminals.”\textsuperscript{16} North Korea has been less insistent at some times more than at others, but nonetheless international law should override any such bilateral commitments. Indeed, Article 33 is now generally accepted to be customary international law, binding even on countries that have not acceded to the convention. China is not only a signatory of the convention and the protocol, it is even a member of the governing body (the Executive Committee) of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and has been a party not only to the application of the convention, but to its strengthening, such as the consensus “conclusion” regarding the proper registration of refugees.

Finally, there are human rights treaties, declarations and instruments that, although primarily dealing with other subjects, do bear on the issue of refugees. Especially important is the Convention Against Torture, which China ratified in 1988. According to Article 3 of that convention, no government shall forcibly return “a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture.”\textsuperscript{17}

Although China appears to accept the principle that political refugees are entitled to asylum,\textsuperscript{18} Beijing has argued that the principle does not apply to these people, whom it considers economic migrants. Indeed, most North Koreans who have left their country have done so primarily for reasons that can be categorized as “economic.” However, there has always been a minority with more political motives for leaving. More importantly, there is a political element inherent in the so-called economic motivations, because food rationing and distribution are governed by political considerations. Furthermore, those who have arrived in China primarily in search of food have a claim to status as refugees sur place. That is, even if their original motives for leaving their homelands are deemed purely economic, such people are at considerable risk of being politically persecuted upon their overt return to North Korea.

But it would be misleading to ascribe a person’s decision to leave solely to economic or to political motivations. The UN, and in particular the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), have recognized that there is often no clear line between economic and political motivations behind human displacements:

The distinction between an economic migrant and a refugee is . . . sometimes blurred in the same way as the distinction between economic and political measures in an applicant’s country of origin is not always clear.
Behind economic measures affecting a person’s livelihood there may be racial, religious or political aims or intentions directed against a particular group. Where economic measures destroy the economic existence of a particular section of the population (e.g., withdrawal of trading rights from, or discriminatory or excessive taxation of, a specific ethnic or religious group), the victims may according to the circumstances become refugees on leaving the country.\textsuperscript{19}

Some North Korean escapees have been primarily fleeing political persecution, while others have been in search of food. But often, people have been prompted by mixed motives. Human Rights Watch reports that in recent years the decision to leave North Korea has been “grounded in a complex mix of personal, economic, and political factors.” Various interview subjects explained their situations:

One young man and his family left in 1999 because he could not enter medical school or a teaching college because of family background. This young man’s family had relatives abroad, whom they expected to help and who did help expedite their transit to South Korea. An older man, who left in 1998, sought economic help from his relatives in China. His troubles [had begun] in 1977, when his family was exiled from Pyongyang and sent to live in an administrative camp for five years because of his father’s perceived disloyalty.\textsuperscript{20}

Given the inhumane conditions in the camps that await the refouled political prisoners,\textsuperscript{21} and the disparity in treatment of different categories of border crossers, those caught tend to deny any political motivation and insist that they had left the country only for economic reasons. Therefore, it is important not to take what appears to be an “economic” situation at face value. North Koreans are subject to DPRK government reprisals if they return home, whether or not they had held unacceptable political or religious views. This is especially the case if they have spent a long time in China or had contact there with foreigners such as South Koreans.

In short, China has clung to the position that all of the arriving North Koreans are economic migrants, not political refugees, and that its first obligation is to uphold its bilateral agreements with North Korea regarding the expulsion of undocumented immigrants. But the reality is that economic and political motivations tend to be intertwined, and there can be little doubt that the various human rights and refugee instruments are applicable to many, and perhaps most, of the North Koreans in China.

The “welcome” in China

As noted above, Beijing and Pyongyang have an understanding, grounded in pre-existing agreements between the two countries, to deal bilaterally with
the issue of people transiting the border. The 1961 treaty, signed during China’s famine years, was designed to address the problem of border crossers who at the time were mostly Chinese citizens. Although the text remains secret, its mechanism may well be comparable to an alleged 1986 protocol between the two countries’ security ministries, according to which both sides pledged to “co-operate on the work of preventing the illegal border crossing of residents.” Any “criminal” shall “necessarily be handed over to the other side.”

This, and Article 33(2) of the refugee convention, raise a question as to who fits the definition of a “criminal.” Article 4(2) of the alleged PRC-DPRK protocol says that if a crime is committed after the border crossing, “the laws of the country” shall apply. It is not clear which country is intended, though translators have interpreted this as meaning “the laws of [the individual’s] country.” This seems doubtful, though no original text is available for checking. In the case of crimes committed in one’s own country before the border crossing, an arrest is to be “based on the laws of the side that made the arrest.” This apparent dual standard is puzzling.

In the DPRK, seeking asylum in another country may constitute the crime of treason. The alleged protocol specifies that “counterrevolutionary elements (spies, terrorists, destructive elements, and assassins . . . )” are subject to repatriation. It appears, therefore, that Chinese authorities are obligated to return to North Korea anyone deemed by North Korea to be a “criminal” even though in almost all cases the individual’s acts would not fall within the international common-law meaning of “crime.” Accordingly, merely exiting the country without proper documentation could be grounds for forcible repatriation, international law on the subject notwithstanding. However, these draconian measures must be understood in the context of constant border crossing that usually does not lead to intervention. Only the more unlucky, and perhaps flagrant, border-crossers end up feeling the heavy hand of the “law.”

On the Chinese side, periods of relaxation have alternated with periods of strict enforcement. During a relatively strict period in 2003, the People’s Armed Police largely handed the job of guarding the border over to the more proactive forces of the People’s Liberation Army. In June 2004, the two countries updated their bilateral border security arrangements in light of the increasing role of the army. Vigilance has also been obvious in other parts of China. The authorities have moved vigorously to prevent North Koreans from traveling directly from China to the ROK. In 2003, the Chinese authorities arrested 48 North Korean asylum seekers as they were about to head to South Korea aboard fishing boats from Yantai on the Shandong peninsula. Given Beijing’s stance on the issue of direct transit to the ROK, the only hope for such would-be asylum seekers has been to travel via third countries.

That has not been an option for many, and the majority who have not returned home have simply remained in China. To deal with such people, China has maintained a regime of negative and positive incentives, such as
the practice of offering inducements to Chinese who report illegal aliens and fines for people who harbor them. Substantial bounties have been paid to anyone who turns in undocumented North Korean immigrants, and fines of 1,000 renminbi (RMB, the equivalent of $120) have been imposed on Chinese citizens discovered protecting illegal border-crossers. When discovered, the North Korean is placed under arrest. Human Rights Watch reports anecdotally that although some people arrested by the Chinese acknowledge reasonable treatment, others charge abuse. One subject – accused of murder, which he denied – claimed to have been tied with rope all around his body from the chest down. Another reported being kept with twelve others in a cell smaller than 30 square meters. Some received electric shocks, others were beaten. Such treatment, illegal under international law, has been reported in Chinese detention facilities near both the North Korean and Mongolian borders.

**Staying beneath the radar**

Tens of thousands of North Koreans have managed to avoid incarceration and carve out some kind of lives for themselves in China, usually in the area adjacent to the Tumen River known by the Chinese as the Autonomous Prefecture of Yanbian (Yonbyon in Korean). Although in recent decades the Chosonjok (Korean Chinese) portion of the Yanbian population has slipped from a solid majority to only 40 percent – because of the arrival in the area of many ethnic Chinese – there are still over two million ethnic Koreans, enough to create a social environment into which the new arrivals can try to assimilate or at least hide. The capital, Yanji, is majority ethnic Korean. Hardly any of the North Koreans speak Chinese, but the new arrivals have no difficulty communicating with Chosonjok, most of whom speak Korean. Safety, however, is another matter. Although they have often gone to great lengths to blend in by using makeup and dressing like locals, the North Koreans’ inability to speak much Chinese makes them vulnerable to arrest as obvious foreigners.

The experience of North Koreans in China has varied over time and from place to place. During more lenient times, China has deliberately overlooked the flow of people across the border and relaxed registration (hukou) requirements. Marriage between Chinese citizens and North Koreans is allowed, and about half of the North Korean women now live with PRC men who are, in some sense, their spouses. In tense times, on the other hand, such as after high-profile refugee invasions of foreign embassies and consulates, the Chinese have cracked down widely. On these occasions, North Koreans are in the greatest danger of being discovered by Chinese police or North Korean agents. The Chinese authorities have sometimes undertaken raids on suspected hiding places and initiated mass expulsions.

Likewise, certain areas are safer than others. An example of a refugee-friendly place is Inner Mongolia’s Baotou. This city has a thriving
community of Korean Chinese and Koreans from North Korea, including immigrants both illegal and legal (such as DPRK officials with quite comfortable second homes). In Baotou, the police have rarely bothered the illegals. The North Koreans openly adhere to their homeland customs, for example, celebrating the Korean holidays. This is quite a different picture from what we know of Yanbian, where many refugees remain in hiding for fear of being apprehended by the police. They might be literally holed up in caves or ground cavities, sometimes for years at a time, venturing out for a few days now and then to earn a little money to pay for necessities. Local authorities, of course, are aware of the situation and may tip off the cave dwellers before conducting obligatory raids.

The ability of the area to absorb outsiders depends to a considerable extent on the condition of the local economy. The Yanbian Korean Autonomous Area comprises about one-quarter of Jilin province, which, while not one of China’s poorest provinces, is far from having one of the most robust of economies. To be sure, Yanji is prosperous, the city having benefited from the considerable investment of South Koreans and émigré Korean Chinese. But most expatriates from North Korea, including the vast majority of the males, remain in the countryside. Here, the economy is much bleaker, with the rural-urban income gap perhaps higher than the national average. With so many rural citizens moving to the towns where they can earn more money – men in construction work, women in the service sector – the resulting labor shortage in the countryside has created an opportunity for North Koreans, albeit one fraught with hardship and hazard.

Some North Koreans have been able to find work and housing in small factories run by Christian churches. Others have been working on farms, earning each year approximately RMB 600, equivalent to $72. It is a dangerous life for both the refugees and their local protectors. The police sometimes issue threats to households and churches suspected of aiding “illegal immigrants.” Employers, who are subject to fines of RMB 30,000 ($3,600) for harboring such people, have often become nervous, pressing the underground workers to move on. Without jobs, the refugees must then transfer from safe house to safe house. When the risk is high they remain indoors, or in their little ground cavities, going outside only when absolutely necessary.

At first, these North Koreans received a reasonably warm welcome. Especially in the late 1990s, the Korean Chinese were sympathetic, for they recalled that during China’s famine in the early 1960s, many fled to North Korea and were saved. But in recent years reciprocity has been more problematic. Donor fatigue has set in, and the crackdown by Chinese authorities and interference by North Korean agents have increased the dangers. There are many horror stories, though arrivals often still enjoy the mercy and kindness of strangers. Chinese citizens, representatives of foreign religious organizations, and humanitarian workers have provided assistance in finding housing, education, health care, and general financial support, albeit to a
fraction of the refugees. The locals have established many “safe houses” and various “underground railroads” for those intent on fleeing to Mongolia or South-east Asia.

Some activists have taken a much more overt approach, organizing attempts to gain entry to foreign embassies and consulates. The main purpose of these efforts seems to have been to draw international attention to the plight of the North Koreans in China. However, such efforts have often had serious side effects, as the Chinese have tended to respond by cracking down on the North Koreans more harshly than ever. Interviews in North-east China, conducted by the organization Refugees International in the summer of 2004, reveal a deteriorating security situation for the North Koreans, with the “underground railroads” becoming insecure and North Koreans facing increased risk of deportation to the DPRK. As a result, some helpers have taken a cautious approach, providing the people with a realistic picture of the difficulties of reaching a third country, and integrating into another culture, even South Korea’s.

For several reasons, the number of North Koreans in China remains unclear, not least because most of them are hiding or doing their best to be unnoticed. Furthermore, whatever the number might be at any given time, it fluctuates, with many returning (voluntarily or otherwise) to North Korea, and a smaller number finding their way abroad. The official Chinese estimate of the number of North Koreans in China is 10,000, but the actual figure is several times that number. It is possible that there were as many as 200,000 at the peak of the famine. The most active NGOs in the area estimate, based on extrapolation from village surveys, that there have been 300,000 or more, but this is probably an exaggeration. More distant (and thus perhaps more objective) organizations have estimated the numbers to be between 10,000 and 50,000 (for 2002). In early 2003, the then UNHCR High Commissioner, Ruud Lubbers, put the figure for China in general at 100,000. Since then, the total is probably under 50,000. In its 2005 report on the subject, the State Department put the number between 30,000 and 50,000. The lower figure can presumably be taken to apply only to the Yanbian area where the majority of North Koreans probably reside. The numbers have declined because of the improved situation in North Korea (more food, less punishment), intensified surveillance by Chinese police and soldiers, and a high level of refoulement.

Women have faced special problems. Various international agreements prohibit trafficking in women, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (CSTPEPO). Neither China nor North Korea has upheld the rights of trafficking victims. As a result, women have faced great hazards. In China, they have often been forced into sexual slavery, and sometimes have been subjected to rape. Despite this, more than three-quarters of the North Korean immigrants are women.
Compared to men, female refugees have had more options, such as finding employment and shelter as domestic workers, though they often end up in prostitution. But even women who have found more orthodox employment have often found themselves overworked and underpaid even by Chinese standards.

Some women have become wives. A few have managed to marry men from Korea, either North or South, but more commonly they have married Chinese locals, usually ethnic Koreans. Sometimes brokers have arranged these marriages in China or even before the women left North Korea; in other cases people sheltering the women have arranged for, or pressed, them to marry locally. Although the arrangements can be exploitive, such women tend to consider themselves lucky – compared with imprisonment or going hungry in North Korea. Some North Korean parents think it better to send their daughters to China than for them to remain at home. At the same time, many of China’s ethnic Korean farmers have difficulty finding local wives, since the young women have been attracted to the cities to work. Sometimes satisfactory marriages result, but all too often the purchased women are resold to other men, often ethnic Chinese; sooner or later these women land in the hands of the police.

Some parents have taken their children with them to China in order to improve their nutrition. Also, North Korean children not from elite families generally receive inadequate education, though it is unlikely that moving to China enhances their educational opportunities. Boys of ten years or so have often been able to survive as beggars in Chinese cities, sleeping on the street or in shelters provided by humanitarian organizations. It is not uncommon for them to return voluntarily to North Korea, children perhaps being less subject than adults to harassment from DPRK authorities. The more successful adolescents take back a little money to their relatives. Others may find their way to third countries, but they are a particularly difficult group to integrate into any non-DPRK society, given their experience of surviving on the edges, or even outside, of any social system. Also, because they are in the country illegally, North Korean children have little possibility of attending school in China, which again would appear to place China in violation of international law. The issue of education is becoming an ever more serious problem as many who arrived as babies or toddlers now approach school age.

Still, for all the difficulties outlined above, people have kept migrating. For many in the DPRK, going to China has become “thinkable” in a way that was once not the case. Although the food situation in North Korea improved slightly after the turn of the century, it is likely that the number of people going to China remains substantial. It has become more generally known in-country that travel to China is not only possible but also very desirable for those who succeed. North Korean propaganda to the effect that China is still a land of strife and famine no longer has any credibility. The migration routes are now well established, and eventual (or even quick) resettlement
outside of China is (no doubt wrongly) perceived as increasingly likely. China, however, has been determined to keep the population of North Koreans in China as small as possible. “If we grant political asylum to one refugee today,” worried one official, “there could be thousands or millions of North Koreans who might seize the opportunity and pour into China.”

Refoulement and its alternatives

Although some North Korean escapees have managed to elude the authorities, a substantial number have not. Over the years, the portion of refuge seekers that China has forcibly repatriated to North Korea is likely to have been about 10 percent (more during crackdowns, fewer during more relaxed times). When captured by the Chinese authorities, the escapees have sometimes been able to get off by paying fines, ranging from RMB 2,000 to 5,000 ($250–600). More often, they have been imprisoned and then returned across the border. While mistreatment has been common in Chinese prisons and holding centers, the conditions have still been preferable to repatriation. In April 2004, believing they were about to be repatriated, 80 apprehensive prisoners in Jilin Province’s Tumen Detention Center rioted and took two guards hostage for three days. After sending in a large force of People’s Armed Police, the authorities regained control. The prisoners’ fears proved justified; the next day most of them were returned to North Korea.

Another incident that year occurred at the Rongjing prison camp, where 110 detainees reportedly conducted a hunger strike.

The North Korean criminal code provides for up to a three-year sentence in a labor re-education camp for “illegal” border crossers. If such a person has “betrayed the motherland and people” or committed “treacherous acts . . . such as espionage or treason,” the term is supposed to be at least seven years, and in serious cases capital punishment is authorized. In practice, the State Security Bureau normally first detains returnees for ten days to two months. The authorities let off some with a simple warning and have sometimes even sent home those considered “minor” offenders after a few months in jail (sometimes only to be incarcerated yet again). Sometimes these “minor” offenders have been transferred to labor camps (nodongdan ryundae) or provincial concentration centers (do jibkyul so). The former are normally for people who have committed minor economic crimes and received sentences of six months or less; the latter are intended for temporary detention and investigation of people suspected of more serious offences. If the motivation for escape is deemed to be purely economic, the sentence might still be relatively light. In the past, the North Korean authorities routinely detained people in reform centers (kyohwaso), i.e., sites of administrative detention.

But for repeat offenders, the religiously inclined, or those who simply were abroad more than a year, the outcome has been harsher. They have been put on trial, either by the Social Security Department or State Security
Department. One young escapee describes what happened to him after his first unsuccessful flight: “I was caught. They sent me to a labor training camp. There I worked in a housing construction site. When I tried to pause and catch my breath, they started beating and kicking me. Many people died there, but I was young enough to survive for four months until I was released.” However, it is likely that conditions have improved. The official Pyongyang line is that people who only went to China in search of food are no longer treated as criminals.

For those considered to have had political motivations, the sentence was once dire: sometimes execution, usually life in prison under potentially life-threatening conditions. Some people have gone to prison farms, which are forbidding places with small, unheated cells and wholly inadequate food. Often prisoners have slept on a cold floor. Sanitary facilities have been poor. Prisoners have been tortured. Sometimes an inmate’s condition would become so dire that the wardens would release him or her, rather than have a dead prisoner on their hands.

Such extreme treatment was relatively common from the mid-1990s through 1998 with apparently fewer instances of such harshness for returnees thereafter. Still, life has been very unpleasant for such people. Human Rights Watch describes the observations of a former border guard repatriated to Musan in April 2000:

> While we were crying loudly, they brought us to the Chilsung customs house in Musan. A North Korean officer of the National Security Agency greeted us there, shaking hands with each of us, saying, “Good job!” However, after the Chinese turned back, the officer shouted, “Kneel down, you son of a bitch.” They checked our pockets. They forced my wife to take off her talle-baji [tailored trousers] and took them away, because they symbolized capitalism. She had to stay, wearing only her underwear, even though it was very cold outside. They also took the South Korean clothing off people. They investigated whether the repatriated people had any relationship with South Korea . . . If a person met South Koreans or reporters or wrote articles, or attended church or escaped after committing a crime in North Korea, they would be secretly killed, without even God knowing.

Of course, it is impossible to verify most of the claims of inhuman treatment of returnees. However, given the closed nature of the system and the refusal of the North Korean authorities to grant access to prison facilities, it would be unwise to dismiss the bulk of the claims. Solid research suggests that the reality is not very different from the worst charges.

Recently there have been signs that elements in the Chinese government may be concerned about the bad image China is gaining over the refoulement. Moderates have been urging a rethinking of the whole issue and arguing that the Pyongyang regime should be pressed to institute Chinese-
style agricultural reforms. Chinese politics at the higher levels, however, is notoriously opaque, and speculation is hard to verify. Still, to the extent that such voices exist and are heeded, China may be inching toward upholding the relevant international laws on refugees.61

One positive development has been China’s increasing willingness to allow legal visits by North Koreans. In 2001, China and North Korea entered into an agreement whereby those North Koreans who can cover their expenses and have a relative or sponsor in China are allowed to enter the country with thirty-day visas, renewable for up to six months. While human rights groups have welcomed the granting of such visas as a step in the right direction, it is not seen as a viable solution to the problem of illegal residence in China. The system works primarily for people of means and connections. The scheme also does not appear to be corruption-free; DPRK and Chinese officials commonly expect “expediting fees,” “appreciation gifts,” or similar emoluments. And such visas are mainly available to those who have good relations with DPRK officialdom. Presumably anyone with a blemished political background would have no chance of obtaining such a visa. The illegals far outnumber those with visas, and the program has not reached those most in need. One can only hope that the program is vastly expanded and applied to undocumented people already in the country.62

A second provision in the 2001 bilateral agreement does potentially apply to the undocumented. Now, a person who meets any of the following three requirements is supposed to be granted the right of abode: (1) law-abiding female spouses of Chinese citizens who have been married for at least three years and have a child; (2) Korean women and children without support in North Korea; and (3) anyone whose parent was a Chinese citizen and who remained in the DPRK after the Korean War.63 It is not known how many have benefited from this provision.

The international response

International reaction to the treatment of North Koreans in China has generally been muted. The West and Japan have had other priorities. There has been the added concern that intervention might be counterproductive, because China might react to pressure by closing the border completely. Given geopolitical realities, the ROK has chosen to tread lightly on this issue, sometimes even to the point of discouraging the South Korean media from reporting on the problem.

On the other hand, South Korean NGOs – such as the Citizens’ Alliance to Help Political Prisoners in North Korea, and various Buddhist and Christian organizations – have been outspoken. Chinese government officials and academics generally perceive these South Korean NGOs as more political or sectarian than humanitarian, groups in other words that seek to publicize problems rather than work seriously to ameliorate them. While not always wrong, this view is a gross oversimplification. In China, the organiza-
tions are at least technically illegal and must operate in secrecy, which is not conducive to the kind of transparency that would dispel suspicions. Given these circumstances, it is unsurprising that the Chinese and North Koreans believe that these organizations are tainted by their underlying anti-communist, anti-DPRK, and Christian fundamentalist points of view.

Many international religious and other humanitarian personnel are working in North-east China, but under difficult conditions. Most are there on a temporary basis. Their presence in country is at the sufferance of China, whose attitude hardened at the turn of the century and became particularly severe in 2002. Aid workers have tended to be closely watched, sometimes placed under arrest and deported. On occasion aid workers have been physically abused. Aid workers operate under such heavy constraints that only an estimated 20 percent of the North Koreans in China have had any contact with foreign NGOs. North Korean spies have reportedly infiltrated some of the teams in China, giving rise to suspicions and recrimination.

Transnational NGOs, largely Western and Japanese, have done what they could, with Amnesty International making appeals and the International Committee of the Red Cross on rare occasions issuing travel certificates. The New York-based organization Human Rights in China has appealed to the Chinese authorities for humane treatment of these refugees and has reminded China of its obligations under international law. Human Rights Watch and Refugees International have also weighed in on these issues. Two organizations – Rescue North Korean People (RENK) and another group in formation – are trying to help people from North Korea now living in Japan.

Normally, in potential refugee situations, responsibility falls on the United Nations. In 2004, the UN Human Rights Commission appointed a Special Rapporteur on North Korea. His report contained recommendations addressed to the government of the DPRK, to countries receiving North Korean refugees and migrants, and to other international agencies. In particular, the recommendations emphasized that the various countries should

uphold the protection of refugees and other persons who have fled from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, including the principle of non-refoulement and the grant of at least temporary refuge/protection, and end bilateral and other arrangements that jeopardize the lives of those who seek asylum.

In terms of other UN agencies, the UN’s World Food Program, which maintains five regional offices in North Korea, has probably helped to reduce the flow of refugees through domestic feeding programs.

But the most relevant institution has been the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. In 1995, before the North Korean famine, the UNHCR established an office in Beijing pursuant to a formal UN-PRC agreement. At the
time, the UNHCR mainly dealt with refugees from South-east Asia. No one anticipated that undocumented North Koreans would soon be arriving in China in substantial numbers. While China originally welcomed the UNHCR presence, it would eventually come to see the organ as meddling in internal or bilateral matters. But according to the 1995 Agreement, the agency was to fulfill all of its functions in accordance with the UNHCR mandate. China was expected to provide UNHCR with information about the condition of refugees and accord the agency unimpeded access to refugees. Disputes were to be submitted for binding arbitration. In the late 1990s, the UNHCR did pay a few visits to North-east China. But after the agency interviewed some North Koreans there and established that they were refugees, China objected and denied access. Since then, UNHCR has had virtually no direct access to the North Koreans in the North-east, notwithstanding the entire corpus of international law to the contrary.

Though often criticized for its failure to act, the body has felt it had to be cautious in dealing with these issues. Then High Commissioner Sadako Ogata said in 2000 that she had to limit herself to “discreet means” of dealing with the problem. She conducted talks with the relevant governments “aimed at clarifying the position of the UNHCR in regard to North Korean political asylum seekers and refugees, and trying to promote a humanitarian approach to this problem in line with universally accepted standards.” The next high commissioner, Ruud Lubbers, initially continued in the same vein. Soon, though still aware of China’s sensitivities, he became more outspoken. The plight of exiled North Koreans was “a serious concern.” He noted the failure of his agency to gain access to them, and declared that many of them “may well be considered refugees.” Above all, he insisted, the principle of non-refoulement had to be respected.

Thus, the organization’s involvement has been largely limited to North Koreans who attempt to gain entrance to diplomatic or international facilities. In 2001, the UNHCR assisted a family of seven North Koreans who sought refuge in the UNHCR’s own offices in Beijing; the people were eventually allowed to travel to a third country. More recently, however, UNHCR has broadened its purview to include, for instance, the case of the aforementioned asylum seekers whose voyage from Shandong to Korea was aborted by the Chinese.

The Chinese government has generally treated with leniency those North Koreans who succeed in gaining entry to foreign diplomatic compounds and has allowed them to travel to third countries, with South Korea being the unspoken ultimate goal. A particularly dramatic diplomatic incident took place on 8 May 2002, when armed Chinese police entered Japan’s Shenyang consulate and dragged away five North Koreans seeking asylum. Although this appeared to be a violation of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, a videotape of the incident showed Japanese officials taking no action to stop the police. Eventually, the UNHCR brokered an agreement for the North Koreans to travel to Seoul via the Philippines. Thereafter, the
Chinese circulated a memorandum to all Beijing embassies, insisting that foreign governments “inform the Consular Department of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in case illegal intruders were found, and hand over the intruders to the Chinese public security organs.” International criticism was considerable. Some ambassadors openly ignored the memorandum on the grounds that, inasmuch as China would probably send the people to North Korea, turning them over would be tantamount to refoulement, and thus illegal.

Although in the aftermath of this memorandum, the Chinese police have heavily guarded the external areas of the compounds, North Korean attempts to gain entry have continued, and have often been successful. Twenty people entered the South Korean consulate in Beijing early in the morning on 15 October 2004. The South Korean policy on such matters has been to respect the wishes of the refugees and negotiate with the Chinese authorities accordingly. Nevertheless, Chinese police have been guarding South Korean diplomatic facilities so tightly that other countries’ missions are now more likely targets. On 29 September 2004, forty-four people disguised as Chinese construction workers climbed makeshift ladders and gained entry into the Canadian diplomatic mission in Beijing. With the exception of one elderly man caught by the Chinese police, all made it into the compound, though one was so badly injured that he had to be sent to a local medical facility. Toward the end of October 2004, a spate of similar incidents took place around Beijing’s foreign embassies.

Those who favor these high-profile tactics argue that they remind the world of the plight of North Koreans in China, even if only a tiny minority benefit directly from the actions. Critics argue that the cost to others is too great and question whether the people organizing these activities are really interested in helping the population or are mainly bent on promoting a political and religious agenda. At any rate, the number gaining access to diplomatic compounds is small compared to the number who quietly pass through China to other countries. Furthermore, most North Koreans in the PRC have no intention of traveling to a third country, preferring to remain in China or to return home when conditions there improve. Other people’s embassy crashing hardly helps their plight.

Those North Koreans who do seek to move on, including the vast majority of those who make it to South Korea, rely on brokers to arrange passage. Brokers are controversial, seen either as crucial cogs in the wheel that enable refugees to reach freedom, or leeches who prey on the desperation of others. Chinese authorities view these brokers as human traffickers. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. At any rate, brokers ply their trade because of China’s policies and the international community’s neglect of these problems. At first, brokers copied the tactics of militant human rights groups, assisting refugees to force their way into foreign embassies, consulates, and schools. When the Chinese tightened security around these establishments, the brokers turned to arranging trips to
Mongolia and South-east Asia. The prices for this service have become somewhat standardized. If, however, a refugee has no money, a handler may agree to provide his services for free or to be paid in the form of a commission by some future employer if employment is found. It is always a dangerous undertaking; if the authorities discover the parties, refoulement awaits the North Korean, prison the Chinese broker.80

Escape from China often involves the purchase of false identity papers and passports. Some refugees simply fly out, but most rely on the brokers to guide them either to Mongolia or across China to Yunnan and on to Laos, Burma, or (more problematically) Vietnam. Some North Koreans who reached Vietnam have been forced back into China. The lucky ones may go on to Thailand or at least Cambodia. Thailand, in particular, respects the international refugee regime. There, religious groups or the South Korean embassy generally refer North Koreans to the UNHCR. After interviewing them, UNHCR has generally confirmed the individuals as refugees, and they have then been allowed to proceed to South Korea.81 Overall, because of the expense and hardship involved, few who have succeeded in completing such a journey. Not only is the risk of capture high, but the bribes, forged papers, and general living and travel costs probably total at least $10,000, and often two or three times that.

Most feasible is travel to relatively nearby Mongolia, even though a trip there requires traveling across Manchuria, which Chinese authorities make difficult. There has been talk among NGOs of setting up a refugee camp in Mongolia for the North Koreans; the site of the former Soviet military base at Choybalsan has been proposed for the purpose. Indeed, the South Korean Christian organization Doorae Community Movement actually purchased land in Mongolia to establish such a camp. But both China and North Korea adamantly oppose the establishment of any such facility, and Mongolia has been disinclined to antagonize either country on the issue. Not even South Korea has favored establishing such a camp.82 The reception the North Koreans receive in Mongolia has varied considerably. Sometimes they have been stopped at the border and forced them to remain in China. At other times, however, the Mongolian authorities have co-operated with the South Korean embassy in Ulan Bator, and with the UNHCR, to protect them and facilitate their onward travel. The Mongolian authorities have not been eager to encourage this phenomenon, and the re-opening of North Korea’s embassy in Ulan Bator in August 2004 has not made matters easier.83

Although most North Korean émigrés have sought first refuge in China, a few cross the 16-kilometer Russo-Korean border, or reach maritime Russia via the PRC. Russia’s ethnic Koreans, known as Kahyeretz, are very poor, do not speak Korean, and have little sense of kinship with people from Korea. However, Russia has often been seen as a better place for Korean refugees than China. The UNHCR has a stronger presence in Russia, and the South Koreans are also able to help them there. In the late 1990s, the Russians
handed over 340 North Korean refugees to UNHCR. However, not all were so fortunate.84

The US response

In the western world, most countries have been slow to involve themselves in the North Korea refugee issue. The United States, given its acceptance of Vietnamese and Cuban refugees in times past, might be expected to welcome escapees from a country that the Bush administration labeled part of an “axis of evil.” Indeed, the US Congress did pass, and President George W. Bush signed, the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, which authorized (but did not appropriate) $24 million per year in assistance, and seemed to provide for some North Korean refugees to come to the United States. The Christian right, which has seemed to dominate the Congressional discourse, managed to insert provocative language into the bill that immediately raised questions as to whether its intent was purely humanitarian.85 Congressman Jim Leach sought to allay these concerns on a visit to Seoul:

The motivations behind the legislation are solely humanitarian. The law was not designed as a hidden strategy to provoke North Korean collapse, or to seek collateral advantage in ongoing negotiations. Put simply, while each of us as individuals may not be, the North Korean Human Rights Act is agnostic about regime change. But it is emphatic about behavior change. An additional aim of the Act is to increase humanitarian burden-sharing by the United States, particularly in terms of refugee assistance and resettlement. Because South Korean cooperation will be important to our own efforts to assist North Koreans, the United States cannot afford misunderstandings regarding our intent, or our desire to be helpful in that regard.86

Such explanations were not enough to allay the fears of Pyongyang, where the reaction was extreme. A statement carried by the official KCNA news service described the new law as “full of anti-DPRK poisonous clauses.”87

At first, the act caused much excitement among those concerned with human rights issues in North Korea. When the law was signed, a Korean-American Christian group announced that it was setting up a shelter in New York to accommodate about 50 North Koreans.88 But as of this writing (August 2005), the bill itself has had little practical effect – much to the dismay of human rights activists.89 The only money appropriated has been $2 million dollars, which the conservative human rights group Freedom House is to use for three conferences. Also, following a provision of the act, the administration appointed a special envoy on human rights in North Korea, Jay Lefkowitz. The envoy’s role, according to the administration, is to raise awareness of human rights issues there.90
Although in the past the United States has granted asylum to a tiny number of North Koreans, the 100 or so refugees who have illegally entered the United States can not likely count on such favorable treatment at the hands of the authorities. However proactive Congressional rhetoric may have sounded, it passed a quite restrictive law. According to Section 302, it “is not intended . . . to apply to former North Koreans nationals who have availed themselves of” their rights as citizens of the South Korea. And the policy of the executive branch has been quite guarded. “The procedures under discussion would allow the United States to accept North Korean refugees who have a compelling reason for resettling in the United States rather than in South Korea or elsewhere.” The reasons for this circumspect approach have to do with homeland security issues (some of the refugees could be DPRK agents), fear of antagonizing Beijing, and a sense that it would be wrong to fast-track these refugees when they have the more appropriate South Korea option while refugees from other parts of the world may be in greater need. It appears, therefore, that the United States intends to hold North Koreans to the same strict standards that apply to other asylum seekers.

Reception in the South

Given the immediacy of the issue, South Korean interest in refugees from the North has been more sustained. Refugees have been arriving in ever larger numbers. During the entire period between the Korean War and 1989, only 607 North Korean defectors reached South Korea – despite the fact that the ROK often encouraged defections. Even in the early 1990s, the number arriving was only eight or nine per year. Both the policy and the situation began to change in 1994, when 52 arrived. The number has increased almost every year since. Altogether, from 1994 through 2004, approximately 5,700 arrived, 1,890 in 2004 alone.

South Koreans have mixed feelings about the prospect of North Koreans arriving in increasing numbers. With some exceptions – including those whose arrival in South Korea could cause the country political or diplomatic hardship – North Koreans have the right to travel to the South, a policy spelled out in law and supported by a national constitution that defines northern and southern Korea as a single country. Although much depends on the attitude of the intermediate host country, the ROK usually does endeavor to facilitate travel to South Korea. In 2003, Seoul issued a position paper that reiterated the principle of accepting all North Korean refugees wishing to come, at the same time promising to assist all people wishing to settle in third countries. However, “from a long-term perspective” the government wanted to reduce the number of refugees “by eliminating causes of leaving their home country.”

As for handling people when they arrive, South Korea has traditionally adhered to the defector model. That is, authorities provided the new arrivals
with a sum of money and then, after the debriefing, largely ignored them. It may be that the ROK is moving toward a more appropriate refugee resettlement model. Now when people arrive in South Korea, they still undergo debriefing by the Korean National Intelligence Service, but they usually remain for a few months at Hanawon Camp, which can accommodate 1,500 people. Even after release, the government continues to have some supervisory authority over them. They still receive financial support from the government, but instead of each person receiving a lump sum on arrival—which in the past often resulted in the funds being mishandled or used to pay off a debt to a broker—it is now dispensed over a three-year period. In addition, in 2004, 70 percent were reported to be on government allowances for the poor.

The transition from living under communism to the rough-and-tumble life of individualistic capitalism is very difficult, and it takes more than money to integrate people into the new society. Although people are now provided with job training, the results have been disappointing, with under 2 percent actually employed. A poll conducted by a South Korean newspaper in September 2004 found that in a sample of 100 North Korean refugees in the South, 69 percent indicated that they would prefer to proceed to a Western country. In 2005, more serious efforts began to help these people find, and function in, normal jobs. But in general, the refugee resettlement program has not been very successful.

Conclusion

China has only reluctantly dealt with the issue of North Korean asylum seekers. It has tried, but largely failed, to keep the matter bilateral between China and North Korea. China is in a dilemma. If it turns a benign blind eye to these people, “the teeth will feel the cold” in the form of Pyongyang’s ire. But if China clamps down too hard, it will provoke an outcry from the international human rights community and sympathetic governments, more muted but still real disapproval from Korean Chinese, and dissatisfaction from one of China’s major trading and investment partners: South Korea.

China has been determined not to perform the role that Hungary played in 1989–90, when many East Germans transited there on the way to West Germany, precipitating the collapse of the East German government. South Korea does not want to see a repeat of the East German scenario either, as the South is in a poorer position to deal with the consequences than was West Germany. The remainder of the international community, for reasons both sound and unsound, has largely ignored the issue—or, in the case of the US Congress, engaged in grandstanding without coming up with any viable solution. During the Six-Party Talks in Beijing over the summer of 2005, the United States refrained from pressing human rights issues, probably out of fear that it would jeopardize any chance to negotiate the denuclearization of the peninsula. But human rights issues, and especially the problem of refugees, will surely arise once the nuclear issue is settled.
Thus, so far, the burden has fallen all on China and South Korea. Both have generally been able to handle the influx, and the South has done so in a reasonably civilized way. However, the number of North Koreans arriving in the South is unlikely to remain at the current low levels, and the international community will have to come to grips with the issue – by pressing China to live up to its obligations under the international refugee regime, by assisting China in providing for the North Koreans in China, by helping those who wish to leave China to do so, and by making provisions for these people to settle in South Korea and third countries.

The outlook in North Korea itself is not wholly bleak. In 1999, North Korea’s economy turned the corner and finally began growing again, with the Gross Domestic Product estimated to have risen by 6.2 percent that year. More recently, growth has slowed to around 1 percent (in 2003\textsuperscript{104} and 2004\textsuperscript{105}), so the economy is still well below 1980s’ levels. The situation can be expected to improve as the benefits of marketization (however limited) are realized. Foreign aid is helping, though there was a general drop in aid to North Korea following the international political crisis of October 2002.\textsuperscript{106}

Regardless of any improvements in North Korea’s economy, the political system remains repressive, so most North Koreans now in China will not likely be willing to return home. Many are frantically trying to save enough money to buy counterfeit Chinese residency cards, which cost over $1,000 each. It is unlikely that North Korea will be able to win the hearts of such people. But if the international community rewards any of Pyongyang’s efforts to reform the economy, that would go a long way toward keeping the flight problem under control. Already there are positive signs. Indications are that the North Korean authorities have concluded (either on their own or due to international pressure) that it is not appropriate to punish people who merely spend time in China in search of food. Cautious steps have even been taken to normalize visits to China, at least on a trial basis.\textsuperscript{107} If all such measures receive sufficient acknowledgment and encouragement from the international community, the flow of refugees might taper off. And if China can be persuaded to live up to its legal obligations under the international refugee regime, a solution to the North Korean refugee problem might be in sight.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 Unless otherwise obvious from the context, the use of the term “refugee” in this report does not imply any judgment as to whether the people concerned fit any particular definition of “refugee.” As used here, the term can be taken as shorthand for such UN parlance as “refugees and other persons who have fled” or “asylum seekers and refugees.” Conversely, the use of a term such as “migrant” does not imply that the person is not entitled to refugee status. The term “asylum seeker” does not denote any formal application for asylum.


6 A DPRK official has been quoted as saying that out of 500,000 people who starved to death in 1996, 50,000 were cadres. Natsios, op. cit.


8 South China Morning Post (Hong Kong), 24 June 2005, p. A14.

9 Ibid. See also Good Friends Center for Peace, “Human Rights and Refugees: The Food Crisis of North Korea,” Seoul, December 1998, http://www.goodfriends.or.kr/eng/report/1694e.htm (accessed November 2004). A related concern is fertilizer. The national intelligence service of the Republic of Korea (ROK) has estimated that North Korea can produce only about thirty per cent of the fertilizer it needs. Thus, since 1999 the South has sent 1.55 million tons, and in June 2005 agreed to send another 200,000 tons. South China Morning Post, 22 May 2005, p. 8.


14 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Art 1, Sec. A, parag. 2.

15 It is not clear just which of these categories applies or apply to the North Koreans in China, but it would be difficult to argue that they are entitled to no protection under any of them. Below we will discuss the question of the distinction between political and economic refugees.


18 This is inferred from the fact that China insists that these people are economic migrants, not political refugees. In 1956 China did grant asylum to a few North Korean officials who had tuned against Kim Il Sung. Lankov, op. cit., p. 857.


23 Ibid., Article 4.

24 Ibid., Article 5, Clause 1.

25 Article 33 of the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (cited above) also states:

The benefit of the present provision may not . . . be claimed by a refugee whom there are reasonable grounds for regarding as a danger to the security of the country in which he is, or who, having been convicted by a final judgment of a particularly serious crime, constitutes a danger to the community of that country.

Such crime appears to be a concern of the Chinese. North Koreans have been charged with burglary, robbery, smuggling, kidnapping, trafficking in women, hijacking aircraft, manslaughter, and murder. Chengming Yang, “North Koreans in China; Challenge and the Solution,” International Symposium on North Korean Human Rights Issues, p. 212. On the other hand, there is a tendency to exaggerate such crime to make Chinese citizens fear and report North Koreans. “This kind of vicious killing reminds us that the issue of illegal North Koran migrants seriously undermines public order.” Quoted (from a public notice board) in Benjamin Kang Lin,
“Korean-Chinese Warned Not to Help Refugees from North,” Reuters, 24 July 2005. The whole issue is shrouded in secrecy and thus difficult to evaluate. “It’s an issue between the two countries,” said one official. “We’re not allowed to tell the outside world.” Ibid.


27 Ibid.

28 Park, op. cit.


31 Human Rights Watch, Invisible Exodus, p. 17.

32 Ibid., p. 16.


40 This figure is said to come from Chinese cadres, and refers to the summer of 1998. See Natsios, Famine.


Between 1996 and 2000, China acknowledges having sent 19,576 people back to North Korea – 17,000 from Jilin Province (including Yanbian), 576 from Liaoning, 1,000 from Heilongjiang, and 1,000 from other areas such as Hebei, Hubei, Guangxi, Guangdong, and Jiangsu. Except perhaps for the Liaoning figure, these numbers are obviously estimates, so the total should also be seen as such. Yang, op. cit., p. 209, citing: Investigating Group of Entry Administrative Bureau of Public Security Department of Jilin Province and Chinese Police Society [sic], “The Status of North Korean Illegal Immigrants and the Suggestion to Handle the Issue,” in Papers on Entry Administration, Qunzhong Press, 2001, pp. 140–1. On extremely rare occasions, a North Korean reaches Hong Kong. The author interviewed one such person in 1996 (when the territory was still under British rule), but knows of no other such cases.

Both countries are parties to CEDAW. Neither is a party to CSTPEPO, which nonetheless was ratified by enough countries to enter into force in 1951.


States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular: (a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all; (b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education.

This right inheres in “each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s . . . national, ethnic or social origin.”

Platt, op. cit.


Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Criminal Code, Article 117.

Ibid., Article 47.

59 Human Rights Watch, Invisible Exodus, p. 22.
60 Ibid. It should also be noted that the DPRK recognizes guilt by association. Relatives of an “illegal” emigrant or of a convicted person can be punished even if they themselves bear no guilt.
62 i am indebted to C. Kenneth Quinones for information on the visa program.
63 Yang, op. cit., p. 212.
64 “China Ousts 4 over Korea Refugee Issue,” The New York Times, 28 August 2003. The crackdown even affected South Korean journalists who were covering the refugee issue.
65 Jung Hwa Song, personal communication.
75 Interview with High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers, in Asahi Shimbun, 4 August 2003 (in which he addressed the issue of the UNHCR being so much more proactive regarding displaced Africans than North Koreans); http://www.freenorthkorea.net/archives/freenorthkorea/000387.html (accessed 1 November 2004; subsequently unavailable).
Video footage in Korea Times (Seoul), 15 October 2004.


Interviewed in the preparation of this article was a Chinese former political prisoner who had been a cellmate of a man who had served as broker, assisting in the transporting of refugees from Yanbian to another province. This broker had acted neither for purely humanitarian reasons nor solely for material gain; rather, his motives seem to have been a mixture. The refugee had paid off a North Korean guard, who in turn had arranged for the refugee to meet the broker. The broker was paid nothing by the refugee, but it was understood that if he found a job for the refugee, the employer would pay the broker a commission. Often in such cases all works out to everyone’s satisfaction, but on his last mission everything went awry at the last minute. They were caught by the police, the North Korean was sent home (probably ending up in a DPRK jail); the broker was convicted of “human trafficking” and sentenced to a harsh 15-year prison term.

Human Rights Watch, Invisible Exodus.


One notorious case involved a group of seven people who escaped from North Korea in November 1999. They included six adults and a 13-year-old boy. The group first entered China and then moved on to Russia. They found refuge in a home in the town of Pervomaiskoe, but were discovered and arrested there by the Russian Border Patrol. Interviewed on Russian television, they said they feared execution if they were returned to North Korea; they wanted to go to South Korea or a third country. At first, the Russians agreed to send them to Seoul and reserved seats for them. However, China, which President Boris Yeltsin was about to visit, objected, and the Russians fell into line. The Russian ambassador in Seoul declared that Russia would not tolerate the use of its territory as a route of passage for “illegal trespassers” from North Korea or any other country. Thus, even though they had been certified as refugees by UNHCR and carried travel documents issued by the International Committee of the Red Cross stamped with South Korean visas, the group was sent back to China. Refugee High Commissioner Ogata insisted that they not be forcibly returned to North Korea. However, her unusually blunt admonition was not heeded. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhang Qihua insisted that the North Koreans in China were not refugees and could be sent back to their country. See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR Protests Chinese Deportation of North Koreans, 13 January 2000 (press statement); http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl = NEWS&id = 3ae6b81460&page = news (accessed 20 August 2005). Information obtained from the North Korean government later indicated that two of the returnees were serving labor camp sentences, while four had “returned to their normal lives.” The existence of the seventh returnee was denied, but other sources found that he had fled once more and reached South Korea. United States Committee for Refugees, World Refugee Survey: Country Report 2002: North Korea, Washington, DC, 2002.


Bloomberg.com, op. cit.


The meaning of this is not altogether clear, and probably was intended to allow the Immigration and Naturalization Service some latitude. The language could be taken to mean that people who went to South Korea have “availed themselves of those rights,” and thus are not eligible for asylum in the United States. On the other hand, if that is what Congress intended, it could have said just that.


The 2004 figure is from International Herald Tribune, 29 April 2005, p. 6. The cumulative figure is the author’s own calculation, based on annual figures from various sources. On rare occasions, people manage to travel by boat directly from the North to the South. Such was the case on 19 October 2004, when two defectors were found in a small vessel off the west coast of South Korea. Yonhap News, “Two North Koreans Defect after Crossing the Western Sea,” 19 October 2004.

The ambivalence of South Korean public opinion is detailed in Shim, op. cit., pp. 58–70.

1. Any person who has defected from North Korea and desires to be protected under this Act shall apply for protection to the head of an overseas [ROK] diplomatic or consular mission . . . 2. The head of an overseas diplomatic or consular mission . . . who receives such an application for protection . . . shall without delay inform the fact to the Minister of National Unification and the Director of the Agency for National Security Planning.


Over the summer of 1994, Congress caught wind of the details of the security negotiations between the United States and North Korea, and many members didn’t like it. They criticized the negotiations process. They called Clinton an appeaser. Some of the most vocal critics, such as Senators John McCain (R-AZ), Frank Murkowski (R-AK), and Robert J. Dole (R-KS), made legislative parries to express their distrust of the process. Most of these attempts failed. But in August 1994, several months before North Korea and the United States signed the Agreed Framework, the legislative opponents were victorious. An amendment that unanimously passed the Senate conditioned any US aid to North Korea on a presidential certification that North Korea had halted its nuclear weapons program and did not have any nuclear weapons.¹

Although the nay-sayers scored a small legislative victory with the passage of the amendment, by the end of Clinton’s second term in 2000, the US government had provided a total of $671.2 million of humanitarian and energy assistance to North Korea.² Although Congress was not able to stop Clinton’s policy in its tracks, it did manage to erect substantial roadblocks. By routinely hammering the administration, Congress successfully prevented full implementation of the Agreed Framework. The resulting delays and hesitations helped to reinforce a lack of trust between the United States and North Korea.

By the time President Bush took office, Congress had shifted its targets away from the narrow provisions of the Agreed Framework and toward a range of new issues such as North Korea’s role in terrorism, drug trafficking, and counterfeiting, as well as humanitarian concerns such as food aid, human rights, and refugees.³ Congress, now with some in the administration on its side, again attempted to erect barriers against US aid to North Korea, this time with human rights rather than nuclear proliferation as the criterion.

Over the past six years, the Bush administration’s policy toward North Korea has shown a marked resemblance to the arguments and strategies developed by congressional opponents to Clinton’s engagement policy. Congress continues to shape US policy by encouraging the administration to
widen its focus beyond the nuclear issue. Although Congress has occasion-
ally taken a harder line than the administration toward North Korea, some
members have also criticized the president’s uncompromising stance. Over
the remainder of the George W. Bush presidency, Congress will play a crit-
ical role in determining how the United States will resolve the nuclear crisis
and balance security with human rights considerations.

The 1994 nuclear crisis

The outlines of current Bush administration policy can be traced back to
1994 and congressional concerns about North Korea’s refusal to comply
fully with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. The
1994 Foreign Relations Authorization Act illustrated the depth of this
concern. The legislation outlined eighteen non-binding policy directives
that included an emphasis on regional responsibility, the crucial role of
China, and the potential use of sanctions as a punitive measure. These three
recommendations, while largely ignored by the Clinton administration,
would all later find an echo in Bush administration policy.

For example, the 1994 legislation recommended involving all regional
countries, including China, in the confrontation with North Korea,
explaining that “[t]he problem posed by North Korea’s nuclear program is
not a bilateral problem between the United States and North Korea, but a
problem in which virtually the entire global community is united against
North Korea.” Continuation of China’s Most-Favored-Nation status was
made contingent in part on its cooperation with “international efforts to
obtain North Korea’s full, unconditional compliance with the Nuclear Non-
Proliferation Treaty.” However, if international coordination proved to be
impossible, “[T]he President should employ all unilateral means of leverage
over North Korea, including, but not limited to, the prohibition of any
transaction involving the commercial sale of any good or technology to
North Korea.” And if North Korea refused to cooperate with the IAEA,
the law called for the president to “seek international consensus to isolate
North Korea, including the imposition of sanctions.”

Congressional input was felt more directly in the implementation of the
Agreed Framework, particularly on US provisions of heavy fuel oil to North
Korea. Presidential budget requests were often not sufficient to meet the cost
of the oil. This forced the president to secure money from other sources,
even in the years that Congress fully appropriated the president’s request.
By the time the Agreed Framework collapsed in 2002, the Clinton and Bush
administrations had spent almost $90 million more on the Korean Peninsula
Energy Development Organization (KEDO) than Congress had earmarked
for the program (see Table 8.1).

Wrangling between the executive and legislative branches over KEDO
funding began before the ink was dry on the Agreed Framework. The FY
95 Foreign Operations Appropriations bill did not include an appropria-
Since the first heavy fuel oil delivery was due on 21 January 1995, funding was arranged by reprogramming US Department of Defense funds without congressional approval. This maneuver angered several members of Congress and triggered what would become an annual battle. In 1996, Clinton began using an all-purpose presidential waiver, known as the 614(a) authority, to secure funds for KEDO, only aggravating Congress further. Through additional prohibitions and requests for reports on a wider range of topics, Congress continued to show its lack of support for the Agreed Framework. In addition, the presidential certification process became increasingly complex, narrowing the negotiating space for the executive branch in dealing with North Korea. Criteria raised in the certification process during the Clinton administration, such as uranium enrichment activities, became increasingly salient during the Bush administration.

Table 8.1: Executive expenditures on KEDO vs. Congressional appropriations FY1996–FY2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Congressional appropriations for KEDO (US$)</th>
<th>Total U.S. expenditures for KEDO (US$)</th>
<th>Total expenditures above appropriation (US$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY1996</td>
<td>22,000,000</td>
<td>22,000,000</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>FY1997</td>
<td>25,000,000</td>
<td>25,000,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY1998</td>
<td>40,000,000</td>
<td>50,000,000</td>
<td>10,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>FY1999</td>
<td>35,000,000</td>
<td>65,100,000</td>
<td>30,100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY2000</td>
<td>35,000,000</td>
<td>64,400,000</td>
<td>29,400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY2001</td>
<td>55,000,000</td>
<td>75,000,000</td>
<td>20,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FY2002</td>
<td>95,000,000</td>
<td>95,000,000</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>FY1995-2002</td>
<td>307,000,000</td>
<td>396,500,000</td>
<td>89,500,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* The Agreed Framework was signed in October 1994, after the appropriations process for the fiscal year 1995 had passed. The Clinton administration informed Congress that approximately $5.5 million would be necessary in FY1995 to supply North Korea with the first shipment of heavy oil mandated by the agreement. This payment, along with $4 million for administrative expenses, was made by reprogramming FY1995 Department of Defense funds. (The actual payment was made to KEDO in October 1995, the first month of FY1996.) In subsequent years, the administration further angered Congress by reprogramming funds to make payments to KEDO in excess of the amount actually appropriated by Congress.
In 1998, House Republicans responded to a succession of bad news – a North Korean submarine discovered on South Korea’s coast in June, August press leaks suggesting that North Korea had built a nuclear facility at Kumchang-ri, and the subsequent North Korean launch of a Taepodong missile over Japan – by cracking down on the Agreed Framework. “I have said from the beginning that KEDO is an irresponsible policy that we never should have entered into in the first place,” Rep. Sonny Callahan (R-AL) said. “But the administration chose to do it, and we have funded it for the last 4 or 5 years, but it is time to take a serious look at KEDO, especially in light of the fact they are now shooting missiles over Japan and indications are that they have missiles that very possibly could reach Alaska.”

It was not surprising, then, that when Clinton asked in 1998 for $35 million to pay KEDO obligations, the House responded with zero funds. Furthermore, the House bill explicitly prevented the president from using the 614 waiver to drum up more assistance for KEDO from other sources. The Senate version required the president to certify that North Korea was not selling ballistic missiles to terrorist nations before KEDO funds would be released. After the Clinton administration threatened to veto the legislation, a final compromise made in the conference committee met the president’s $35 million budget request. However, the legislation retained a “Special Authorities Amendment” that seemed to restrict the executive branch from using the 614 waiver to authorize more than the $35 million already appropriated. In addition, the Conference Committee Report warned the president that the 614 waiver could be repealed if abused. Nevertheless, the president immediately used the waiver again to spend a total of $65.1 million on KEDO – $30.1 million more than Congress had appropriated.

Congressional attempts to obstruct the implementation of the Agreed Framework and Clinton’s persistence in honoring the agreement frayed the relationship between the executive and legislative branches, making it very difficult for the administration to meet its minimal commitments to North Korea much less move forward on such outstanding issues as lifting economic sanctions and working toward normal relations. As a result, the atmosphere of mistrust between the two countries deepened. That the two countries possessed very different political systems – emphasized by the US president’s inability to compel congressional support – only contributed to the misunderstandings.

**Congress widens its attack**

Congress and the president waged battle over more than simply the provisions of the Agreed Framework. In 1998, for instance, Congress implicitly criticized the president’s policy by demanding that he appoint a “North Korea Policy Coordinator.” Clinton satisfied the demand by naming his former Secretary of Defense William Perry to the position. The following
year, House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-IL) formed the North Korea Advisory Group (NKAG) comprised entirely of House Republicans and chaired by Benjamin Gilman (R-NY).20 The Advisory Group, which met for the first time on 8 September 1999, was charged with answering the question, “Does North Korea pose a greater threat to US interests today than it did five years ago?” Unsurprisingly, the group answered “yes.” It based its conclusion on the assessment that US policy was not addressing the North Korean military threat, that food aid was insufficiently monitored and was sustaining the regime, and that the US government wasn’t addressing a range of other related issues such as drug trafficking, terrorism, counterfeiting, and human rights.21

The food aid issue was a red flag for NKAG, which used the issue of monitoring to focus their attack.22 Concerns about monitoring food assistance had existed ever since the United States first began supplying North Korea with food aid in 1996. By DPRK request, for instance, the World Food Program (WFP) could not hire fluent Korean speakers, leaving the WFP staff dependent on DPRK-supplied translators. Nor did North Korea provide a list of all the institutions receiving aid. WFP staff also had to give advance notice of monitoring visits.

In 1999, in response to a request from Rep. Gilman, the US General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a report on Food Aid to North Korea. The GAO found that since the WFP “cannot be sure that that the food is being shipped, stored, or used as planned . . . [it] cannot be sure it is accurately reporting where US government-donated food aid is being distributed in North Korea.”23 If monitoring remained “unsatisfactory,” the GAO recommended that the Secretary of State should consider changes in US policy on food aid to North Korea.

Some members of Congress criticized the report. Rep. Tony Hall (D-OH), for instance, complained that the report’s “negative bias” didn’t incorporate the experience of aid workers in North Korea, made monitoring demands on North Korea that were out of sync with requirements in other countries, discounted eyewitness accounts of improvements, and claimed diversion of food aid without proving it.24 “If we refuse to help people who live under brutal regimes, even when we can hide behind the excuse that we can’t absolutely guarantee they are getting food,” he said, “we are betraying President Reagan’s policy that a hungry child knows no politics.”25

The issue of food aid monitoring did not gain sufficient traction during the Clinton years to interfere substantially with policy. In part, this was due to the US Agency for International Development-funded consortium of private voluntary organizations that lasted from August 1997 to May 2000.26 In addition to implementing the administration’s food aid policy, these groups continued to educate members of Congress about the importance of maintaining humanitarian assistance to North Korea.27 As time went on, several NGOs withdrew because of monitoring constraints.28 Some of these, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, testified in front of Congress in favor of
suspending aid until monitoring conditions improved. However, in January 2002 enough NGOs were still actively distributing food in North Korea and advocating in Washington to discourage legislation that would have conditioned food aid to North Korea. While the Senate’s version of FY 2003 Foreign Operations appropriations called for “full verification of the use food assistance” in North Korea, this language did not make it into the final bill. Nevertheless, as a result of pressure from interest groups eager to reverse Clinton’s politics of engagement, monitoring of food aid again returned as a congressional issue with the introduction of The North Korean Freedom Act in 2003.

Refugees and human rights

After George W. Bush took office in 2000, the congressional focus on security began to diminish, and its attack on the engagement policy with North Korea began to coalesce around two key issues: refugees and human rights. Early in the Bush presidency, an idea began to circulate in Washington that North Korea could be forced to collapse by encouraging a mass exodus of refugees. Norbert Vollertsen, a German doctor who had worked for 18 months in North Korea, was one of the first to articulate this approach. In congressional testimony on 21 June 2002, Vollertsen explained that he was inspired by the example of the “several dozen [East German] refugees in the West German Embassy in Prague” who precipitated the reunification of Germany. He continued,

And then we had the idea, “Oh, let’s repeat history. Why not go to the West German Embassy in Beijing with some North Korean refugees and enter this embassy and start what finally will lead to the collapse of North Korea and reunification?” . . . We are hoping for a mass escape, like in former East Germany and in Prague, and we hope to repeat history, what will finally lead to the collapse of North Korea, and I think this is the only solution, also for China and for all the people there.

Soon groups such as the conservative think tank Hudson Institute began to support this approach. Eventually, even Republican moderate Sen. Richard Lugar (IL) lent credence to this line of reasoning. Meanwhile, in October 2002, the US Committee for North Korean Human Rights (HRNK) was established in order to promote the idea that “the United States should make human rights a major component of its relations with North Korea, equal with the demand that North Korea stop developing nuclear weapons.” At a hearing in June 2003, HRNK’s executive director, Debra Liang-Fenton, called for legislation “to help the North Korean people.” That summer, twenty-one organizations joined together to form the North Korea Freedom Coalition (NKFC) in order to “oppose
any financial assistance by the United States unless there is confirmed, measurable progress on human rights for the North Korean people, and to guarantee the US is in no way responsible for subsidizing or enabling the North Korean government to further oppress its people." Together, the two groups successfully placed North Korean human rights on the congressional agenda through meetings with staff and members of Congress, briefings, conferences, testimony at hearings, and articles in the South Korean and US media. But most significantly, NKFC successfully solicited grass-roots support, particularly in the evangelical and Korean American church communities. By March 2004, they had managed to collect over 8,000 signatures in favor of legislation on human rights.

The original version of the legislation promoted by the NKFC, the "North Korea Freedom Act of 2003," provides an important glimpse into their tactics as well as the emerging consensus in Congress. At first glance, this bill seems primarily humanitarian in nature, especially its authorization of nearly $5.5 billion for various humanitarian purposes. Such provisions provided the basis for support of the bill within some sectors of the Korean American community.

In fact, however, the bill tried to address all aspects of US relations with North Korea, including the drug trade and weapons of mass destruction. It also sought to pressure the South Korean and Chinese governments to change their policies toward North Korea. The provision of the bill likely to have had the greatest impact on security issues, Sec. 403(b), barred all non-humanitarian assistance to North Korea until the country demonstrated substantial progress in human rights issues such as prison reform. Sec. 403(b) might have prevented the United States from offering any incentives to North Korea in negotiations over the current nuclear crisis. Meanwhile, the bill's attempt to include human rights in any discussions with North Korea also potentially jeopardized ongoing attempts to resolve the nuclear crisis.

But blocking negotiations was perhaps not the primary goal. According to Michael Horowitz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, one of the refugee provisions in the bill was designed to stimulate a "critical mass of refugees" into leaving the country. Such an exodus, he said, would result in an "East European [or] Soviet Union [type of] implosion" of the regime. Given the explicit links made by Horowitz, it is not surprising that some members of Congress and their staff saw the bill as a thinly veiled call for regime change. However, after some months of consideration, it became clear that the Freedom Act would not get support from the leadership of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which endorsed a more practical philosophy.

In an attempt to make the bill less political and more humanitarian, Rep. Jim Leach (R-IA), Chairman of the House International Relations Subcommittee on Asia and the Pacific, revised the North Korean Freedom Act to create the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 (NKHRA).
Rep. Leach’s office consulted with the NKFC as well as groups maintaining shelters in China and those providing food aid to North Korea. The South Korean Embassy expressed concerns. In Seoul, National Assembly members weighed in on both sides of the argument. Twenty-seven ruling Uri Party members sent a letter to the US Embassy in Korea against the bill; thirty-three members of the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) signed a statement in support of the bill.40

The end result was a leaner, cleaner piece of legislation focused almost exclusively on human rights and refugees. Many of the provisions most dangerous to refugees that were included in the Freedom Act were eliminated, as was the relentless and impolitic criticism of China and South Korea. At the urging of Sen. Joseph Biden (D-DE) and others, the Senate amended the restriction on non-humanitarian assistance, converting it from a binding prohibition to a non-binding Sense of Congress provision. This was done to preserve the authority of the president to negotiate a nuclear deal with North Korea that might include energy aid, other non-humanitarian assistance, or a threat reduction program patterned after the Nunn-Lugar measures used to help reduce nuclear arsenals elsewhere in the world.41

Perhaps most importantly, Rep. Leach differentiated between the regime-change agenda of the Freedom Act and the humanitarian agenda of the NKHRA. As explained in the conference report:

[the NKHRA] is motivated by a genuine desire for improvements in human rights, refugee protection, and humanitarian transparency. It is not a pretext for a hidden strategy to provoke regime collapse or to seek collateral advantage in ongoing strategic negotiations. While the legislation highlights numerous egregious abuses, the Committee remains willing to recognize progress in the future, and hopes for such an opportunity. Indeed, credible and substantial improvements in the human rights practices and openness of the Government of North Korea would help to build substantial goodwill with the United States.42

President Bush signed the NKHRA into law on 18 October 2004. Despite the welcome revisions achieved by Rep. Leach, Sen. Lugar, Sen. Biden and others, concerns remain that the bill could have a harmful impact on North Koreans and on regional security. South Korea, in particular, expressed strong reservations about the new law, and the bill provided an additional rationale for anti-American demonstrations in Seoul. South Korean Unification Minister Chung Dong-young indirectly criticized the law in statements favoring his country’s “quiet diplomacy” approach. He warned, “Human rights problems in communist countries have never been solved by way of applying pressure.”43 Lee Boo-young, Chairman of the Uri Party, stated his concern that the law would have a negative impact and result in North Korea backtracking on its recent attempts to open up to the outside
world. Ultimately, the way in which the North Korean Human Rights Act is implemented will determine whether it helps or harms North Koreans.

Misinformation about the law spread quickly after its passage, and apparently many North Koreans mistakenly believed that the bill would grant them easy access to the United States. Some thought that the $20 million authorized annually in the bill would be immediately appropriated and handed out in lump-sum payments, similar to the amounts meted out to defectors by the South Korean government – only in larger sums since the US is a richer country.

The United States should do several things to clear up these misconceptions, make sure the bill is more effective, and avert a human disaster in and around North Korea. First, the US government must avoid the kind of high-visibility approach to refugee protection that has backfired in the past. Norbert Vollertsen announced publicly in November 2004 that 130 North Korean refugees were currently in the South Korean Embassy in Beijing and promised that “more will come.” Expecting to receive US funds, Korean American groups traveled to the region in greater numbers, visiting shelters to assess the situation “with their own eyes.” These highly visible activities run the risk of exposing and thereby destroying the underground railroads that brings thousands of North Koreans to the South each year. Any funding appropriated as a result of the bill must take such risks into consideration.

In addition, careful attention must be paid to the activities of the special envoy for North Korean human rights, a State Department position created by the bill. The State Department, wary of the potential negative impact of the appointment of a Special Envoy on negotiations to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, delayed making this appointment until after the fourth round of Six-Party Talks had recessed. Now that Jay Lefkowitz has been appointed special envoy in August 2005, every effort should be made to address the human rights issue through a strategy that does not derail negotiations on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. The special envoy should create a separate track to discuss human rights directly with North Korea, outside of the security dialogue, and should coordinate with similar international efforts on the issue. However, if the special envoy uses the position as a soapbox to constantly criticize North Korea from afar, little progress will be made.

Aware that the North Korean Human Rights Act would not be funded until FY 06, if at all, human rights advocates inserted $2 million for a “human rights conference” into the appropriations bill for Commerce, Justice, State, and the Judiciary. This spending bill was ultimately folded into an Omnibus appropriations bill and eventually passed with the funds earmarked for an “international conference on the human rights situation in North Korea” to be administered, according to the Conference Report, by Freedom House. With $2 million to spend, Freedom House decided to hold three conferences, one each in Washington, Seoul, and the European
Union. The first conference, held in Washington in July 2005, proved to have several problems in its execution, including lack of translation for the Korean participants and the absence of mainstream human rights groups from the panels. Of greater concern, attendees were free to conclude, however mistakenly, that since the US government funded the conference, it reflected US government policy; after attending the conference, one confused South Korean participant asked, “Does the USA support regime change?”

Next up for Congress

Although members of Congress have very different approaches to resolving the current crisis with North Korea, the general trajectory of legislative policy has been toward a harder line. Congress put obstacles in the way of the Clinton administration’s implementation of the Agreed Framework. It sought to condition food aid and pushed to include a range of non-security issues in US-North Korean negotiations. And it has pushed hard on an issue – human rights – that threatens to upend negotiations altogether.

Even as Congress as a whole was pushing this harder line, congressional supporters of engagement such as Biden and Leach found somewhat greater receptivity to their approach within the administration at the beginning of Bush’s second term in office. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill, who won the trust of President Bush while ambassador to Poland, has been given a much longer leash in negotiations with North Korea than his predecessor James Kelly. Hill has met frequently with his North Korean counterparts one-on-one, within the context of the Six-Party Talks. Yet with the two most visible advocates for engagement with North Korea from the first term – Secretary of State Colin Powell and Deputy Secretary Richard L. Armitage – no longer in the administration, the depth of the administration’s commitment to engagement remains unclear.

The greater flexibility shown by the Bush administration has generated at least three different interpretations based on the unproven assumption that North Korea itself is willing to make a deal. The first school of thought presumes that Bush, in sore need of a foreign policy victory with US support for the war in Iraq waning dangerously, will press for successful completion of negotiations, even it means backtracking on previous assertions about refusing to “reward North Korea for bad behavior.” A second school presumes that Bush is pushing the soft line only to prove that it doesn’t work – and that the hard-liners are waiting in the wings to be unleashed as soon as the Six-Party Talks are decently buried. And a third school presumes that it doesn’t matter whether or not Bush wants a settlement, because Congress will prevent a settlement even if Bush, soon to enter lame-duck territory, asks for it.

As noted above, policy pushed by Congress during the Clinton administration became both practice and law during the first George W. Bush term.
If the first school proves true, and a settlement appears imminent, then congressional efforts to push a harder line may well shift into high gear. This could mean maintaining North Korea’s position in the “axis of evil” through a renewed emphasis on North Korean human rights abuses. Congress might also pay increasing attention to North Korea’s criminal exports such as drug trafficking and counterfeiting.\(^53\) In 2004, Sen. Jon Kyl (R-AZ) introduced a measure requiring an annual report from the president describing North Korea’s role in trafficking illegal narcotics that was not enacted.\(^54\) A similar provision is likely to be introduced and easily passed in the 109th Congress. In addition, congressional pressure for UN sanctions against North Korea is a possibility. Congress may also pass resolutions that link foreign investment in North Korea to workers’ conditions, much as the Sullivan Principles conditioned investments in South Africa during the apartheid era. Congress could also attempt to use human rights criteria to deny funds for a new “agreed framework” with North Korea, no matter how advantageous the terms for the United States.

While Congress has spent the past four years refining its approach to North Korean human rights, it needs to take several steps to ensure that its actions have the desired effect of helping rather than hurting North Koreans. Congress must also not abandon the core issue in the current US-North Korean dispute, namely security. Nuclear war, after all, would be a gross human rights violation. The two issues must both be addressed, though preferably on parallel tracks. In order to achieve its stated human rights objectives, Congress must take measures to promote the mutual trust and confidence that are the key to advancing US human rights goals in North Korea. In other words, Congress must embed human rights in a larger framework of engagement.

In contrast to the current US approach, the European Union offered diplomatic recognition to North Korea with human rights as part of the package. There was a breakthrough in such dialogue during British Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell’s visit to Pyongyang in September 2004. The British raised four cases of concern. After close questioning regarding findings in a report by human rights expert David Hawk,\(^55\) Vice-Foreign Minister Choe Su Hon agreed to discuss individual human rights cases.\(^56\) Mr. Choe also gave “preliminary approval” for a return visit by UK human rights expert Jon Benjamin, who accompanied Mr. Rammell on his trip. In addition, Mr. Choe agreed to meet again with Mr. Rammell to discuss “international scrutiny of North Korea’s human rights record.” However, Choe insisted that visits from international human rights experts were contingent on “more trust and confidence.”\(^57\) Unfortunately, no progress has been made since that time.

Trust and confidence are necessary ingredients for advancing any of the US agendas in North Korea. Absent diplomatic relations, US efforts to spur improvements of North Korean human rights can only be attempted through outside pressure. But pressure is only one of many tools, and it is
often ineffective, particularly when used alone. Change depends on increasing, not decreasing, contacts and information flow, through inviting North Koreans to interact with rest of the world. Not only does the US government want North Korea to understand US expectations, the US government also needs to understand North Korean perspectives. In order for a human rights dialogue to be effective, Congress should learn more about what is happening on the ground in North Korea.

Rep. Tom Lantos (CA), the top-ranking Democrat of the House International Relations Committee, demonstrated the viability of this approach. A Holocaust survivor and an ardent human rights advocate, Rep. Lantos was a co-sponsor of the North Korean Human Rights Act. Yet in conjunction with his strong support for the bill, he maintained communication with North Korean officials and in January 2005 visited North Korea for three days. Rep. Lantos’s meetings with North Korean officials covered both human rights issues and the benefits that would become available to North Korea after the resolution of the nuclear standoff. The congressman reportedly told North Korean officials that the United States is able to maintain positive relationships with other countries even when human rights are an issue, citing China as an example. Rep. Lantos made a second trip to North Korea in late summer 2005, this time with Chairman Leach.

Other members of Congress should follow Rep. Lantos’s lead. When members cannot visit the country, they should encourage staff delegations to visit Pyongyang. Congress should also encourage exchanges on a wide range of issues so that conversations can run along many lines and with many people. Diplomatic recognition would accelerate such exchange. Tom Malinowski, the Washington Advocacy Director of Human Rights Watch, recommends the normalization of relations as an early step, not a late one.

Nor should a human rights dialogue become a barrier to the security dialogue. “I actually don’t favor linkage on security issues,” human rights researcher David Hawk has stated. “I think if security issues can be isolated, then you should trade security for security. I think that the U.S. should establish diplomatic relations with North Korea irrespective of all other considerations because that will enable the U.S. to have more conversations with North Korea and the North Korean people about human rights.”

Congress has failed to prioritize the abolition of North Korea’s nuclear program and must correct this omission as soon as possible. Whether an agreement is imminent or not, the preparations, financial and otherwise, should be made immediately. Congress needs to authorize funding for the dismantlement of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, contingent on a verifiable agreement to do so. Such a move would greatly reassure all of our partners in the Six-Party Talks, especially South Korea, which has been frustrated with the dominance of the human rights agenda in Congress and its potential chilling effect on negotiations with North Korea.

Congress must ask the administration to prepare for implementation of a dismantlement program. As former Assistant Secretary of Defense Ashton...
Carter has suggested, a single US official is needed to oversee a dismantle-
ment program. He pointed out in a Senate hearing.

Over the history of the Nunn–Lugar program, its projects have been
implemented by Defense, State, Energy and Commerce, these depart-
ments have developed expertise in these types of projects, and it would
be imprudent not to exploit it for the North Korea program. But we
cannot confront North Korea with the same bureaucratic chaos with
which the states of the former Soviet Union still contend.62

Congress should certainly be commended for raising human rights concerns
about North Korea, as well as concerns about the conditions of North
Korean workers. However, Congress must recover from its amnesia to recall
the security agenda that dominated its concerns during the Clinton adminis-
tration. Congress can and must play a constructive role both in solving the
current nuclear crisis and addressing all the issues that fall under the more
general category of human security.

Notes
1 Dole Amendment No. 2273 to the Bill HR 4426, as reported in the Congressional
2 Mark Manyin and Ryun Jun, “U.S. Assistance to North Korea,” Washington, DC:
is the amount pledged for that year, although partial shipments may not have
taken place until the following year. The KEDO figure is the amount appropri-
ated by Congress specifically for KEDO; some additional funds for KEDO came
from other sources.
3 Meanwhile, the POW/MIA issue, which was salient enough in 1992 to prompt the
first visit to North Korea by a US Senator, ceased to be a hot topic once a
program was established to identify and return remains to the United States.
George Gedda, “U.S. Lawmaker to Visit North Korea,” Associated Press, 18
December 1992. However, in May 2005, the recovery program was suspended by
the Bush administration, because of “the issue of force protection and the issue
of assuring the safety of the people on the ground,” according to Richard
Lawless, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Asian and Pacific Affairs, oral
testimony before the Asia and Pacific Subcommittee, House International
Relations Committee, 109th Congress, 26 May 2005.
4 P.L. 103–236 (All public laws referred to in this chapter can be found at the
Library of Congress website, http://thomas.loc.gov.) When Congress directs an
agency to carry out a new program it first passes an “authorization bill” that
establishes the legal basis for the program. Congress appropriates funding for
activities that have already been authorized through appropriation bills. See
DC: The Brookings Institute, 1995. For a basic overview of the appropriations
process, see Robert Keith, “A Brief Introduction to the Federal Budget
1996.
5 P.L. 103–236, Sec. 529 (11). Clinton attempted this approach in 1999 with the
“Four Party Talks” format, including China, North Korea, South Korea and the
The goal of the Four-Party Talks was a formal end to the North Korean war. However, they fizzled out long before meeting this objective.

6 P.L. 103–236, Sec. 513(5).
7 P.L. 103–236, Sec. 529 (12).
8 P.L. 103–236, Sec. 529(10).
9 The reasons for the difference between budget requests for KEDO and actual funds needed would be an interesting area for additional research. For instance, it remains unclear whether the discrepancy can be explained by rising oil prices alone or presidential caution in revealing the true costs of implementing the agreement.
11 The appropriations bills contained both appropriations for KEDO and provisions barring direct and indirect funding for North Korea, an apparent contradiction not all that rare in appropriation bills. The Clinton administration may have interpreted the prohibitions to mean that use of the 614(a) waiver was necessary to access appropriated funds. The 614(a) waiver is included in the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, Part III, Chapter 1, under (614) Special Authorities:

   The President may authorize the furnishing of assistance under this Act without regard to any provision of this Act, the Arms Export Control Act, any law relating to receipts and credits accruing to the United States, and any Act authorizing or appropriating funds for use under this Act, in furtherance of any of the purposes of this Act, when the President determines, and so notifies in writing the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations of the Senate, that to do so is important to the security interests of the United States . . . Before exercising the authority granted in this subsection, the President shall consult with, and shall provide a written policy justification to, the Committee on Foreign Affairs 889 and the Committee on Appropriations of the House of Representatives and the Committee on Foreign Relations and the Committee on Appropriations of the Senate.

   The waiver is normally used for unexpected events, when funds have not been explicitly appropriated during the normal budgeting process.
12 For example, in the FY 99 Foreign Operations Bill, the Secretary of Defense is required to submit a report on

   the degree to which KEDO’s mission and the Agreed Framework continue to promote important United States national security interests, contribute to delaying North Korean indigenous development of nuclear weapons-related technology, and positively impact the level of tension on the Korean Peninsula.

   (P.L. 105–277 Sec. 582 (g))

   The FY 99 Bill also expresses concern about North Korean missile development. The FY 2001 Foreign Operations Bill demands that the President verify that “there is no credible evidence North Korea is seeking to develop or acquire the capability to enrich uranium.”(P.L 106–429 Sec. 572(b)(5)).
13 Mr. Sonny Callahan, Congressional Record, 17 September 1998.
14 HR 4569, 105th Congress.
15 HR 4569, Sec.702 and Sec. 578, 105th Congress and S 2334, Funding for Department of State, 105th Congress.
The Conference Report explains that:

The conferees remind the Administration that the section 614 waiver authority is an exceptional provision of law provided to the Administration to enable the President, after prior consultation with the Congress, to waive certain provisions of law because of unexpected contingencies... The conferees note that in 1974 this section of the law was nearly repealed. This was at the request of Sen. Symington, who said that “Congress has given Presidents entirely too much power to use its foreign aid funds.” Conference Report 105–825, available at http://thomas.loc.gov in html format.

Apparently, despite Congress’ clear intention to restrict funding, the State Department interpreted the new provision to mean that the President could use $35 million more than the amount appropriated. Congressional Research Service, personal communication, Fall 2004.

P.L. 105–277, Sec. 582 (e), signed into law 21 October 1998.


Since 1997 North Korea had become one of the world’s largest recipients of US and other food aid, and food aid was meeting at least one-fourth of the country’s food needs until 2002. In most years, the United States was the largest international donor to the WFP appeal. In the period FY 1995–2004, the US contributed a total of 2,053,694 metric tons of food aid, at an estimated cost of $676.3 million. For food aid through FY 2003, see Manyin and Jun (2003, p. 8); FY 2004 numbers come from a personal communication with the State Department. The final 50,000 metric tons pledged for FY 2004 was shipped in 2005. In summer 2005, the United States again pledged 50,000 metric tons to the WFP appeal. They also pledged $2 million in additional aid to be spent by NGOs able to meet more stringent monitoring criteria.

“Report to the Chairman, Committee on International Relations: Foreign Assistance: North Korea Restricts Food Aid Monitoring,” GAO NSIAD-00-35, October 1999, p. 4; http://www.gao.gov/archive/2000/ns00035.pdf (accessed 1 November 2004). The “General Accounting Office” was renamed in July 2004; it is now called the Government Accountability Office (its acronym remains GAO). The GAO, known as the “congressional watchdog” for its analysis of federal spending, generates reports in response to requests from members of Congress. It is considered to be independent and nonpartisan.

Hall came to the forefront of the humanitarian community’s attention in 1993 when he fasted for 22 days in response to the elimination of the House Select Committee on Hunger. Hall’s well-known activism on hunger issues inspired him to visit North Korea six times. He used each trip as an opportunity to encourage assistance to North Korea.

“U.S. Policy Toward North Korea,” House International Relations Committee, 27 October 1999, 106th Congress. Initially Hall’s arguments prevailed, and the State Department was unresponsive to pressures to make food aid contingent on improvements in monitoring. However, in June 2002, the U.S. State Department
announced that it would tie increases in food aid to improvements in monitoring. Since that time, food aid has dropped, both because of a perception of reduced need and because of the persistence of monitoring issues. In 2005, Richard Ragan, Country Director for the WFP program in North Korea at that time, developed bold new monitoring protocols with North Korea, including the issuance of ration cards. The effectiveness of this new system remains to be seen.


27 The food crisis also created an opening for Korean Americans to raise funds to provide food assistance to North Korea. Before the mid-1990s, many Korean Americans might have been hesitant to advocate for the North Korean people for fear of being labeled “pro-Pyongyang,” and the resulting political estrangement from the mainstream Korean American community. The June 2000 summit between Kim Jong Il and Kim Dae Jung also sparked a new interest in North Korea among younger Korean Americans.

28 Flake, op. cit., p. 31.


30 The groups argued that other methods of pressuring North Korea would be more successful, and would leave fewer North Koreans at risk. Personal communication, January 2002.


33 In a Washington Post op-ed, Lugar stated:

In the meantime, we should authorize the resettlement of some North Korean refugees in this country, and press our allies to do the same. If this sparks a greater flow of North Koreans from their gulag-like country, some would argue, that could help keep pressure on North Korea or even hasten the fall of the Pyongyang regime, much as the flight of East Germans in 1989 helped undermine the Communist system there. International steps to help North Korean refugees would also be an unmistakable signal to Pyongyang that the world community will not turn a blind eye to the regime’s systematic human rights violations and its unconscionable neglect of its people’s basic needs. Regardless, we should offer resettlement options to North Koreans because it’s the right thing to do.


34 HRNK website; http://www.hrnk.org (accessed 1 September 2004).


37 S 1903 and HR 3573.


Sec. 403(b) in the Freedom Act, Sec. 202 (c) in the Human Rights Act.


Park Doo-sik. The GNP, on the other hand introduced its own North Korean human rights act in 2005, following the lead of Japanese lawmakers.


Between 2005 and 2008, Congress must decide how much to appropriate for these activities in the following fiscal year, from zero up to the total amount authorized in the bill. Twenty million dollars a year are authorized to aid North Korean refugees outside of North Korea for FY 2005–8, and $2 million annually are authorized for the other two categories. In July 2005, the Senate Appropriations Committee included language in its report (S. Rpt. 109–96) on the FY2006 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Appropriations Bill recommending that an unspecified amount of the $900 million appropriated for the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) be spent on North Koreans outside of the country. Since PRM would already be free to allocate a percentage of its budget on North Koreans even without the authorizing language contained in HR 4011, the Senate’s recommendation – without a specific amount earmarked – should be seen as an expression of concern about North Korean refugees rather than an absolute demand for action. The House report was silent on North Korean refugees. The Conference Committee process, which should take place in Fall 2005, may yield more stringent spending requirements.

108-S. 2809, under “Title IV-Department of State and Related Agency”.


Although Freedom House covered the hotel costs of at least some of the South Korean delegates in Washington, translation was not provided, leading one frustrated Korean participant, himself a fluent English speaker, to state “they didn't want our mouths, they didn't even want our ears; they only wanted our bottoms. On a scale of one to ten, i would give this conference a zero” (personal communication). Many mainstream human rights and refugee groups were sidelined in what turned out to be an event dominated by political conservatives.

Personal communication.

Although National Security Advisor Stephen J. Hadley has not yet revealed his colors, during May 2002 preparations for the first high level talks with North Korea, Hadley surprised Armitage by going for the hard-line option when Armitage was pushing for a more moderate option. The resulting compromise set the tone for an increasingly hawkish approach. Glenn Kessler, “For New National Security Advisor, a Mixed Record,” The Washington Post, 17 November 2004, p. 6.

S. 925, Sec 815, 108th Congress. (This issue was also raised in FY 99 and FY 00 Foreign Operations Senate bills.)


Rep. Curt Weldon (PA) gets first prize for face-to-face meetings in an effort to end North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. Despite Bush administration reluctance to bless Weldon’s travel – unusual because, as the second-ranking Republican on the House Armed Services Committee, Weldon wields considerable power – Weldon led two six-member bipartisan delegations to Pyongyang in May 2003 and January 2005. The administration has also paid little attention to Weldon’s “Korea Peace Initiative.” Weldon continues to maintain contact with the DPRK Mission to the UN in New York. However, he has yet to play an effective role in addressing congressional concerns about North Korea’s human rights issues.


Threat is the mother of multilateralism – or so it seems at first blush. What else besides a grave threat could motivate countries to relinquish some small part of their sovereignty to form a security alliance? Some threats are so monumental – Nazi Germany, for instance – that they can bind together actors as wildly different as the Soviet Union and the United States. When such threats pass, though, the security alliances typically founder. More enduring multilateral structures, as opposed to tactical military alliances, require more structured threats. A mere ten years after the end of World War II, NATO yoked traditional adversaries France and Germany together with the United States against the perceived threat of the Soviet bloc. This transatlantic alliance has managed to outlive the Soviet Union’s dissolution only through the articulation of new threats: Balkan nationalism, multiple crises in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and, more recently, global terrorism.

But surely threat is not the only binding force in geopolitics. In the case of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), threat played a rather minor role in drawing together thirty-five communist and capitalist nations in a loose negotiating framework that promoted exchanges at the military, economic, political, and cultural levels. Rather, at the heart of the CSCE was a “grand bargain” that provided key participants certain benefits that they couldn’t get from bilateral discussions or existing security arrangements. Threats, then, are the big stick of geopolitics used to herd donkeys despite their natural inclinations, while grand bargains are the little carrots that occasionally entice the stubborn beasts to huddle closer for mutual gain.

Let’s, then, reformulate the initial statement about the relationship between threat and multilateralism. According to the General Theory of Multilateralism, countries recalculate their national interest to join hands with friends and even foes only in the presence of a grave threat to all potential alliance members. But a Special Theory of Multilateralism also applies to exceptional cases such as the CSCE. Under unusual geopolitical conditions, such as the détente between East and West in the 1970s, countries of disparate systems and governing ideologies will forgo the articulation of an
overarching threat, acknowledge mutual interest, and create multilateral institutions for resolving common problems.

Neither the General nor the Special Theory of Multilateralism seems to apply to North-east Asia.\(^2\) There has been no East Asia NATO. Nor has an East Asian equivalent of the CSCE come into existence. Why is this the case? After all, there has been no shortage of perceived threats in East Asia. Indeed, the United States has built its bilateral alliance system on a foundation of threats emanating from Beijing, Pyongyang, and Moscow, an assessment to which US allies in the region have largely concurred. (Certainly, too, other countries in the region have articulated their own grave threats: for instance, China’s conception of US imperialism or North Korea’s understanding of Japanese militarism.) The United States has also claimed that, absent its large military presence in the Asia-Pacific, a regional power vacuum could lead to a repetition of the 1920s and the rise of a military hegemon. A strong United States, so the argument goes, not only preserves the status quo along the Cold War dividing lines of the DMZ and the Taiwan Straits, but has also kept Japan safely within its “peace constitution” and South Korea from developing a nuclear program. Herein lies a more basic fear at the heart of modern geopolitics: the fear of anarchy.\(^3\) These twin fears – of the exercise of (rising) hegemonic power and the absence of (stabilizing) hegemonic power – have served as the rationale both for the US occupations of South Korea and Japan in the immediate aftermath of World War II and for Seoul and Tokyo thereafter to accept an abridgement of sovereignty to accommodate strong alliances with Washington.

If threats abound in North-east Asia, why have they not given rise to an East Asian version of NATO? Scholars have exhaustively picked over the reasons why East Asia has not followed the European example, a divergence that began with the unenthusiastic US response to the “Pacific Pact” proposed by Philippine, Taiwanese, and South Korean leaders in 1950.\(^4\) The United States has traditionally preferred bilateral agreements to avoid getting bogged down in difficult consensus building and to expedite military coordination. Bilateralism has also provided a certain flexibility in handling the three very different statuses of its allies (Taiwan’s lack of de jure sovereignty, Japan’s lack of a “normal” military, the effective control the United States exerts over South Korean forces). Disagreements over history (Koguryo, Japan’s World War II conduct) and geography (Tokdo/Takeshima, Senkaku/Diaoyu, Kurile Islands) remain persistent in the region – in sharp contrast with Europe, for instance, where disagreements over history textbooks and borders have become, as Americans like to say, “history.” Multilateral norms have also been notably weak in the region, despite common adherence to Confucian values and a shared experience of Chinese high culture. Perhaps more critically, the United States does not share a cultural history with East Asia as it did, for example, with Europe.
The General Theory of Multilateralism, then, doesn’t apply to East Asia. Grave threats have generated bilateral agreements, but have been insufficient to engender a more structured, NATO-like multilateral security arrangement. Nor have conditions been propitious for the Special Theory to come into play. So far, at least, the countries of the region have not been motivated to transcend boundaries and ideologies to grope their way toward a “grand bargain” that might address not only the current nuclear crisis but other outstanding regional security issues. The key reason for this lack of an East Asian CSCE seems to lie with the status of North Korea. This putatively communist country remains a diplomatic outlier – lacking normalized relations with the United States, Japan, and South Korea – and has been generally reluctant to participate in multilateral security dialogues. The CSCE could proceed without marginal Albania; North Korea is too central to the future of East Asia to be left out of a similar negotiating framework.

And yet, theory aside, multilateralism paradoxically seems on the rise in East Asia. The Six-Party Talks have brought all the principal powers to the negotiating table four times and prompted the Chinese to propose that the talks become institutionalized. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), with the participation of China, remains a viable forum for discussing security issues, and the ASEAN plus Three (China, Japan, South Korea) is moving toward a regional economic system. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization brings together China, Russia, and four Central Asian states for colloquies on terrorism and border issues. The common denominator in this springtime of regional cooperation is Beijing. China has embraced multilateralism as both a norm of conduct (in the constructivist sense) and a tactic to advance its own interests (in the realist tradition).

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. China’s multilateralism, even when officially encouraged by the US government in the case of the Six-Party Talks, has occasioned much soul-searching in Washington. According to the more diplomatic articulation of Washington’s fears, heard most often among think-tankers inside the Beltway, Beijing’s new fondness for multilateralism is part of a “charm offensive” to disarm critics and distract attention from its great power ambitions. Further to the right, the considerably less diplomatic “China bashers” have finally recovered their voice in Washington policy circles to accuse China of building a military that soon will rival the Pentagon’s and that it will use to seize not only Taiwan but other valuable real estate around the world. Such fears of China, expressed candidly or covertly, have pushed the United States to enhance its security relationship with Japan, effectively handcuffing the most important participant in any viable regional order for the region. Fear of China has also heightened US commitment to regional missile defense and non-proliferation, policies that have drawn an invisible line through the region dividing Japan and Taiwan from China, Russia, and the two Koreas.

China and the United States appear to be suitors offering their prospective East Asian bride very different matrimonial packages: the inclusive
multilateral embrace versus the exclusive protective umbrella. This picture of China as multilateralism’s biggest fan and the United States as its biggest foe is not quite accurate. At issue here is not whether a multilateral regional order emerges in East Asia, but what kind. Will it be a US-dominated security system à la NATO, a revived Sino-centric system, a quasi-independent structure like the CSCE, or some other manner of beast? This will depend on how threats are defined in the region and whether certain proto-grand bargains can develop into more region-wide negotiating frameworks. East Asia’s security future, then, lies somewhere between these perceived threats and these potential bargains.

**US grand strategy**

In testimony before Congress on 26 May 2005, new Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill outlined US policy for East Asia. It was not a dramatic speech, for it did not mark any major departure in US policy. However, Hill’s speech reflected some subtle but important changes in Bush’s second-term approach to the region.

Hill placed emphasis, for instance, on “freedom,” echoing Bush’s second inaugural and implying political links between human rights and security issues not only with respect to China (for instance, opposition to lifting the ban on arms sales that the EU favors) but to North Korea as well (with human rights an increasingly important topic for the administration as well as for Congress). Hill devoted a good amount of space to US relations with Japan and, despite South Korean and Chinese objections, supported Tokyo’s bid for a permanent UN Security Council seat. He not only stressed the importance of US bilateral relations in the region but also the bilateral Chinese-Japanese and South Korean-Japanese relationships, implying that the countries of the region should take a page from the US strategy book in thinking about their own security problems.

Perhaps the most striking part of Hill’s speech, however, was the section on multilateralism. The remarks on “multilateral engagement” amounted to a mere three sentences acknowledging the importance of APEC, ARF, and ASEAN. By comparison, Hill lavished three full paragraphs on Mongolia. Even the paragraph on Mongolia’s multilateral engagement was more detailed than the paragraph on US multilateral engagement.

Hill’s remarks thus conformed to the conventional narrative: the US vision of the East Asian security order is a bilateral one. But in Bush’s first term, an important counter-narrative emerged from the State Department. Former Secretary of State Colin Powell described this counter-narrative, somewhat disingenuously, in an early 2004 article in Foreign Affairs. The administration policy, Powell contended, was not unilateral but instead relied primarily on partnerships. In East Asia, for instance, the administration pushed for Six-Party Talks against the advice of those calling for direct bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang. And the administration was also
championing the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) as a multilateral non-proliferation strategy (with the Regional Maritime Security Initiative eventually slated for East Asia in particular). Powell might also have mentioned the trilateral coordination of policy with South Korea and Japan. Powell’s views found echo in Francis Fukuyama’s vision of a “neoconservative moment” in which the United States ceased to ignore regional arrangements proposed by China, Japan, Malaysia, and others. “I believe that East Asia is under-institutionalized,” Fukuyama wrote in 2004, “and ripe for some creative thinking by the United States.”

What Powell neglected to mention was that the administration chose a multilateral format for talks with North Korea to hobble negotiations not advance them. And the PSI, since it lacked participation from South Korea and China, more resembled the anemic “coalition of the willing” that backed the US attack on Iraq; it is, to quote one scholar, an attempt to apply the administration’s concept of “preemptive self-defense” in a way that “eschews both ad hoc unilateralism and institutionalized multilateralism.” Powell also forgot to mention that the Bush administration had pushed one of the premier multilateral institutions – the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) – out of existence. Like the Clinton administration, the Bush administration has relied on “à la carte multilateralism,” which means working in coalition with others if possible, working bilaterally as a matter of course, and working alone if necessary. As Ralph Hassig and Kongdan Oh argue, multilateralism is more often an obstacle than anything else to the Bush administration: “The risk in broadening any alliance is that some members might not be sympathetic to US foreign policy and might even work against it.” This observation could also function as a generic rationale for bilateralism.

After Powell resigned in November 2004, the rhetoric of multilateralism has largely disappeared from administration policy statements about Asia. Condoleezza Rice’s decision not to attend the summer 2005 ARF summit is a potent symbol of Washington’s lack of interest in regional security structures. Although Rice convened a one-day meeting with representatives of Japan and South Korea to discuss strategy in advance of the fourth round of the Six-Party Talks, trilateralism has received scant attention from the Bush administration and the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) has fallen by the wayside. PSI is still viable and, indeed, there has been some mention of a PSI “plus” that would address counterfeiting and drugs. But with PSI’s chief promoter John Bolton now at the United Nations, this initiative has taken a back seat to the unilateral reconfiguration of US forces and the strengthening of the bilateral security relationship with Japan.

Let’s consider the altered relationship with Japan in more detail. With full US support and indeed pressure, Japan has embarked on an ambitious reworking of its concept of national security. The US-Japan security relationship has always been close, closer even than the nuclear umbrella or the
number of troops and bases might otherwise suggest. But now, Japan is breaking out of its constitutional shackles to become something like the “Great Britain of Asia.” It provided logistical support for the US war against the Taliban, peacekeepers for the war in Iraq, and Marine Self Defense Forces for humanitarian operations after the recent tsunami disaster in Southeast Asia. In December 2004, the Diet passed new defense guidelines that modified a longstanding ban on arms exports so that the government could fully cooperate with the United States on missile defense. In February 2005, the United States and Japan updated their security agreement to include the area around Taiwan as a “common strategic objective,” though without mentioning what specific military assistance Japan might provide the United States in case of war. In May 2005, Japan participated for the first time in Cobra Gold military exercises in Thailand.

Japan’s security role is not simply supplemental to the United States. Japanese Self-Defense Forces have been more aggressive in pursuing and even attacking vessels. In 1999, using offensive force for the first time since World War II, the SDF fired on suspected North Korean spy ships. No longer limited to rhetorical force, Tokyo has felt more comfortable challenging Beijing over oil deposits in disputed waters. To reflect its new capacities, the SDF is about to be renamed, simply, the Japanese Army. More dramatic offensive capabilities are in the offing, as Japan is currently acquiring an in-flight refueling capability so that its air force can conduct retaliatory strikes (long-range surface-to-surface missiles, also on the wish list, have apparently become less of a priority). The broaching of this taboo topic of using offensive force has made it possible for Japanese officials to discuss even more “unthinkable” options such as a first-strike capability and even, though an overwhelming percentage of the population remains opposed, a formal nuclear arsenal. True, Japan’s military forces, even under the restraints of the “peace constitution,” were not inconsiderable: a 2004 military budget of $42 billion (roughly comparable to what the British and French spend, but double the South Korean budget), a quarter of million people in the armed forces (more than the British, somewhat less than the Germans), a “recessed” capacity to produce an arsenal of nuclear weapons in as little as six months, and an overall level of technology surpassed only by the United States. In other words, Japan’s military capacity has been “normal” for some time. With the change of military philosophy and the acquisition of the hardware to back it up, however, Japan’s military will vault to the top tier and clearly outclass its regional competitors.

This new “normal” Japan is key to overall US security plans in Asia, particularly to balance a rising China. After a few years of apparent quiescence, the “Blue Team” has regrouped to advance once again its Clinton-era agenda. These “China bashers” argue for a more robust response to China’s increased military spending and “expansionist” aims and for a greater commitment to arming Taiwan and boosting the island’s international legitimacy. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s statements in June 2005
reflect the growing influence of this group. “China appears to be expanding its missile forces, allowing them to reach targets in many areas of the world, not just the Pacific region, while also expanding its missile capabilities here in the region,” Rumsfeld said. “Since no nation threatens China, one must wonder: Why this growing investment?” Pragmatists within the Bush administration, however, have been wary of foregrounding any China-bashing arguments at a time when they are putting pressure on Beijing to render North Korea more flexible at the Six-Party Talks. This debate between neo-conservative idealism and realpolitik took place behind the scenes of the Department of Defense assessment presented to Congress in July. The discussions also prefigure the battle shaping up around the next Quadrennial Defense Review in February 2006, which is expected to place a greater focus on the Asia-Pacific region.

Central to this renewed focus on Asia-Pacific – after five years of devoting considerable money, military hardware, and manpower to Central Asia and the Middle East – is the continued force modernization designed to maintain the US maritime dominance in the region, beef up the rapid-response capability, and integrate the next generation of high-tech to counter asymmetrical threats. Rather than reducing its footprint in the region, the United States is simply shifting its weight: withdrawing troops from South Korea and marines from Okinawa, but upgrading military capacities across the board. Decision-making capabilities are shifting eastward to Hawaii, in order for the Pacific Command to better coordinate the different services and to give generals maximum flexibility in times of war. At the same, the US Army I Corps is set to move from Washington State to Camp Zama near Tokyo, and the US Navy wants to replace the Kitty Hawk carrier at Yokosuka with a nuclear-powered carrier over the objections of the Japanese.

If Japan’s relationship with the United States can be summed up as an exclamation point, the US-South Korean alliance is a big question mark. A major reason for the attenuation of the trilateral coordination of the 1990s, a key part of the Clinton administration security strategy and what might have served as the core of an East Asian NATO, is that one leg of the triangle has atrophied. Although force modernization dates back to Pentagon re-evaluations of the early 1990s and Japan’s restructuring of its security philosophy began in earnest after 1998, US disenchantment with South Korea is more recent, beginning with George W. Bush’s first awkward meeting with Kim Dae Jung in spring 2001. Since that time, the Bush administration has treated trilateral relations as a zero-sum game, with Japan’s gains balancing South Korea’s losses.

With the election of Kim Dae Jung in 1997 but more so with Roh Moo-Hyun’s victory in 2002, South Korea’s regional threat perception has diverged dramatically from that of Japan and the United States. The changes in South Korean perspective cannot be understood in budget terms, for the government has continued to allocate a significant portion of its budget to the military and has only increased that share in the past few years.
South Korea has begun to transform its political view of North Korea and its economic understanding of China. North Korea no longer serves as a “main enemy.” Efforts to engage the country economically (through Kaesong), culturally (through exchanges), militarily (discussions on East Sea disputes), and even politically (raising the forbidden topics of POWs and South Korean abductees in the June 2005 ministerial) all add up to a bilateral “grand bargain” that could, in the absence of hard-line stances from Washington and Tokyo, serve as the core of a regional grand bargain. China, meanwhile, has been a principal economic partner and a source of cultural interest, clearly for the younger generation of political and civic leaders but also for the business community. China remains a “threat” in certain regards – witness the “garlic wars” of 2000 when South Korea attempted to impose tariffs on cheap Chinese garlic pouring into the country. But South Korea’s decision not to join the United States and Japan in PSI or missile defense is as much to maintain good relations with Beijing as to curry favor with Pyongyang.

This reconfiguration of threat – and movement toward a grand bargain with North Korea – underlies recent statements from Roh Moo Hyun about his desire for South Korea to play a “balancing” role in East Asia, suggesting not so much neutrality (as the Voice of America reported) as a hope to regionalize the hard-won cooperation that characterizes North–South relations. It also figures in Seoul’s decision to pull out of the US-South Korea Combined Forces Command’s Plan 5029, the coordinated effort to prepare for North Korea’s collapse. South Korea sees reunification in a 20–30-year timeframe, not as a sudden German-style absorption. A grand bargain with the North is predicated on regime evolution not regime collapse, thus the desire to maintain distance from US military plans. More daringly, Seoul has opposed US plans to bring “strategic flexibility” to military forces so that they can engage more easily in “out of area” operations. Quite simply, Seoul doesn’t want to be caught between the United States and China or between Japan and China, realizing the grand bargain with the North requires regional cooperation, not heightened militarization. In punishment for this independence, more so than as a response to civil society protests against US army actions, the United States may well reduce the number of troops in Korea to fewer than 25,000. In addition, a four-star general’s post will be transferred from Korea to Hawai‘i. Some US conservatives are so provoked by South Korea’s independent noises that they are urging an end to the alliance. They articulate strongly what some in the Bush administration believe but prefer not to say publicly: Seoul is no longer a reliable ally.

The emergence of two opposed triangles in the 1990s – China/North Korea/Russia versus the United States/South Korea/Japan – has broken down as a result of China’s adroit diplomacy but more so over South Korea’s newfound independence. This is why the thin multilateralism of Powell and Armitage has given way to the turbocharged bilateralism of Rice and Hill.
China's new multilateralism

If the United States were fully in control of the security dynamic in East Asia, this story of aborted multilateralism and a strengthened alliance with Japan at the expense of South Korea would be the end of the story. But the United States is not fully in control. And this bothers both the Bush administration and its mainstream critics (read: the Democratic Party shadow cabinet). While the United States has focused on other parts of the world, fumbled the North Korea issue, and alienated its South Korean ally, China has changed the reality on the ground. Since introducing its New Security Concept in 1997, China has identified a way of winning friends and gaining influence in East Asia through multilateralism.

Multilateralism functions in two important ways for China. On one hand, it is a method that organizes Chinese interests in the region better than the previous approaches of isolationism, hard-power confrontation, or intermittent bilateralism. Taking international institutions seriously, as opposed to simply paying lip service out of allegiance to communist internationalism, turns out to pay actual dividends. At the same time, multilateralism is a tactic that gives an asymmetrical advantage. If the United States and Japan eschew multilateralism in the region, China can win points in this relatively neglected arena. China's military is outclassed by the United States, so it can have no power advantage: the Council on Foreign Relations estimates that the Chinese military is at least two decades behind the United States in terms of technology and capability. Nor can China hope to woo Japan or South Korea away from the United States and into its own bilateral security alliances (US fears of South Korea slipping into the Chinese orbit have been exaggerated). Thus, multilateralism offers China a way of gaining influence asymmetrically, much as insurgents will opt for guerrilla warfare to gain an asymmetric advantage against a larger military force.

As Samuel Kim points out, China's new foreign policy can most easily be seen in its divergent responses to the two nuclear crises on the Korean peninsula. In 1994, Beijing largely ignored the problem. Eight years later, though, it worked hard to build a multilateral forum to defuse the confrontation. Similarly, in the South China Sea during the 1990s, China attempted to use military force or the threat thereof to advance its territorial claims. But in 2003, China signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN committing the parties to a non-aggression pact and raising the possibility of a more binding agreement on the South China Sea in the future. Instead of continuing to juggle its border disputes with Russia and Central Asian states bilaterally, China channeled them into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an organization that expanded to address larger security questions of terrorism and separatism. Under China's guidance, the SCO has also sought to undercut US military power in Central Asia – at the 5 July 2005 summit, the SCO called for the withdrawal of US military from bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan – and to build a broad-
based regional alliance by according observer status to Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan, and India. This multilateral approach doesn’t, of course, apply to areas that Beijing has already declared part of its territory: China is not interested in internationalizing the Taiwanese or Tibetan issues for these are not considered foreign policy questions. However, China is quietly repairing ties with former adversaries Russia and India, has concluded agreements with US allies such as Pakistan and the Philippines, and is pursuing bilateral security dialogues with South Korea and Japan. Such energetic diplomacy suggests that the brokering abilities it has brought to the Six-Party Talks could equally apply to the region as a whole – if other conditions were more encouraging.34

China’s stock has risen in the region as a result of its diplomatic activity. Consider the difference between these two statements coming out of Singapore. In 1972, Singapore leader Lee Kuan Yew declared in an interview that expansionism was part of Chinese ideology: “They can never give it up. They want a string of fraternal Communist states around their borders.”35 Contrast this sentiment with that of Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, at a June 2005 conference, who stated that “China realizes that it needs to help other nations to benefit from China’s growth, and has been doing so actively and intelligently. China is aware of the potential disruptions its growth may create, and has affirmed its determination to develop peacefully.”36 The transformation of attitudes in Singapore is by no means unique. In a poll conducted by Globescan, respondents viewed China’s role in world politics more favourably than the United States, particularly in Indonesia (68 percent favourable) and India (66 percent), despite the troubled relations with these countries in the past.37 In an Australian poll, China’s foreign policy drew a more favourable assessment than that of the United States by a margin of 69 percent to 58 percent.38

It is important to note that a driving force behind China’s new multilateralism – and its positive reception around the world – is economic. The growing Chinese economy depends on a stable security environment in the region, open markets for its exports, and reliable sources of energy. Multilateralism offers China a way to sustain its economic miracle by embedding it in a regional framework. The economy-security linkage is consistent across different levels of political authority. At the global level, China has embraced globalization and engagement with the World Trade Organization along with détente and increased trade with the United States. At the sub-regional level, Beijing is investing a lot of money into its north-east region bordering Korea, which requires a stable and secure investment climate to one day rival the burgeoning south-east.

China’s multilateralism, while taking advantage of US disinterest in alliance-building in the region (outside of Japan and Australia), is not put forward as an alternative to US power. In fact, as Robert Sutter points out, China believes that the US military “guarantees the sea lanes of communication so important for oil imports coming to China, helps maintain
stability on the Korean peninsula, and provides important leadership in the war on terrorism.” In this sense, China views US unilateralism much as the world views Microsoft’s commanding market position: an aggravating system but a useful system nonetheless. There are exceptions to this rule: China pushed for the SCO to take a position on ending the tenure of US troops at bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. But in general China’s multilateralism has been a constructive asymmetrical response to US unilateralism rather than an aggressive symmetrical opposition. At the same time, while China has gotten the “religion” of multilateralism, it remains agnostic about what forms multilateralism can and should take. It is thus experimenting with various institutions: SCO, ASEAN, Six-Party Talks, ARF, and so forth.

To sum up thus far, the United States has defined threats in East Asia in such a way as to solidify bilateral relations with Japan and undermine any possibility of an East Asian NATO. Its own brand of multilateralism – PSI, Six-Party Talks – has foundered on a fundamental refusal to negotiate give-and-takes, certainly with North Korea and increasingly with South Korea as well. China, meanwhile, has sought advantage through multilateral structures and has laid the foundation for a very different East Asian security system. The tipping factor in all this in the short term, barring unexpected political changes in Washington and Beijing, is North Korea.

North Korea as pivot

The two Koreas are currently rebuilding their long-severed train link. Once the Korean train system has been reunified, a traveler will be able to get on in London and get off at the very tip of South Korea, in Busan. Japan is considering an underwater link, which would extend this Eurasian connection even further. More important than tourism, the train link will significantly cut the cost and time of shipping freight between Europe and Asia. Should the train link have a multiplier effect on trade, both China and Russia would revive their age-old roles as bridges between East and West. The Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) would assume heightened importance. And North Korea would switch from being East Asia’s dead end to its new crossroads.

While this scenario seems a win-win deal for all concerned, one major power is conspicuously absent: the United States. The Bush administration has claimed that integrating North Korea into the international system is a signal priority. Its actions, however, belie its rhetoric. The administration has not treated Pyongyang’s economic reforms of 2002 and their follow-ons – designed to bring the North Korean economy into greater harmony with the global economy – as worthy of support, either rhetorical or financial. It has continued the Clinton administration policy of blocking North Korea’s access to international and regional economic institutions. It has been cool to proposals such as Rep. Curt Weldon’s (R-PA) that would offer North Korea a piece of a regional energy pipeline deal in exchange for shutting down its nuclear program. And, perhaps most significantly, the Bush admin-
istration has treated South Korea’s engagement policy with the North as little more than appeasement and has put pressure on Seoul to cut back on economic assistance and joint projects.

For the Bush administration, North Korea has so far proven too useful a threat to consider any grand bargain that might integrate it into the regional and global economies. The North Korean “threat” serves as a justification for maintaining US military presence in East Asia. North Korea’s missiles, the threat of which figured prominently in the 1998 Rumsfeld Report, have made missile defense more politically feasible in Washington. Judging from its various national security documents, the Bush administration certainly considers China the more long-term threat. But given US corporate ties to China and Beijing’s willingness to join the war on terrorism, it has been more politically expedient to elevate the North Korean threat.

The administration’s approach to North Korea, then, has been to treat it as a security problem rather than as a potential partner in economic engagement. Pyongyang’s statements on economic reform serve as distractions from its real purpose: to prepare for an inevitable military confrontation with the United States. Kim Jong Il’s “military first” doctrine, the secret highly enriched uranium (HEU) program, the issuance of the “Wartime Work Guidelines of April 2004,” the open declaration of nuclear capability: US hardliners use this evidence to prove that their hard-line counterparts are in charge in Pyongyang, not the technocrat-reformers pushing for markets and free trade zones.41

Rather than be saddled with an agreement with an “evil” power that would lose the administration crucial support from its conservative backers, the administration has pushed for regime change in North Korea.42 It is difficult to piece together the long-term vision of Rumsfeld, Cheney or other key “regime change” advocates. Absorption by South Korea is, of course, one option. But the shift in political temperament in South Korea deeply concerns Washington. Like the united Germany that lies at the center of “old Europe,” the two Koreas are at the center of what might well become “old Asia.” Japan, like Great Britain, supports US policies with few conditions. South Korea has become unpredictable. An ever more integrated peninsula that combines the anti-Bush administration sentiment of the south with the genuine anti-American sentiment of the north would challenge US influence in the region. Nationalism, the administration is finally coming to realize, can be a more powerful source of anti-American sentiment than communism. A North Korea simply absorbed into South Korea, bereft of nuclear weapons but with chauvinism intact, could yield this “sum of two nationalisms” scenario. So instead of absorption, the administration might also be entertaining other options, including a regime change that transforms North Korea into a post-communist anchor, the Romania of Asia – a country to be relied on in the containment of China, a country more dependable than the unpredictable South Korea, a country more grateful in the long run than Japan.
For the United States and Japan, a politically intact and nuclear-armed North Korea is the grave threat in East Asia. For China and South Korea, North Korea can certainly be a grave irritant but it also figures in any future grand bargain in the region. The Six-Party Talks have stumbled not only over rhetoric (how Washington and Pyongyang talk about each other) or the details of CVID (the disbursal of rewards during the denuclearization process). The negotiators have failed to reach an agreement because North Korea figures very differently in the regional plans of the principal negotiating parties.

The abovementioned train scenario demonstrates how gradual Korean reunification can provide a foundation for regional integration. Many “grand bargains” put forward to solve the current nuclear crisis similarly point toward potential “grand bargains” for the region as a whole. In their “grand bargain” proposal, for instance, Michael O’Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki propose offering a “more for more” arrangement that involves all the countries in the region in a carefully pitched exchange of economic and security incentives.\(^4\) North Korea has indicated that it would embrace CVID if it were a regional dismantlement of nuclear potential; a solution to its energy problems will require some regional arrangement. Regional integration is dependent on Korean reunification, but unification also is largely dependent on regional support. Some North–South economic deals have involved China. The Kaesong project, to succeed, will have to identify markets for products other than simply South Korea. The capital that North Korea needs to rehabilitate its economy will have to come in part from Japan and the Asian Development Bank.

Central to the gradualist approach to Korean reunification is the notion that economic engagement will (1) help defuse tensions between North Korea and its neighbors; and (2) encourage political and social changes within North Korea. The first is an old argument, that trade is the great softener of rough edges between countries. Trade with the United States and Japan will promote a thickening of relations, more points of contact, and, most importantly, a greater number of carrots that North Korea could lose if it returned to an aggressive posture. The Kaesong project, with its successive waves of ever more sophisticated joint ventures, is a good example of this philosophy. The fact that Kaesong lies along an invasion route to the South makes it into an even more potent symbol of the engagement versus containment trade-off. The second argument derives from the experience of China since its 1979 reforms. Economic engagement will strengthen reformists within the North Korean regime, empower a new class of entrepreneurs, produce a new middle class, and eventually stimulate some form of civil society that will demand greater representation. The North Korean military will buy into the reform process by setting up its own companies. Engagement with international financial institutions will force transparency upon North Korean financial (and political) institutions.

While it is true that both of these arguments have their flaws – trade has not eliminated all security conflicts and there have been limits to domestic
change within China itself – economic engagement has certainly encouraged the trend of multilateralism in Chinese foreign policy. For North Korea to move from being chief obstacle to primary pivot of regional integration, its regime must also perceive that multilateralism has advantages beyond zero-sum calculations, that proceeding down the multilateral path can lead to significant reduction in threat, that multilateral security initiatives are tied inextricably to the rewards associated with economic engagement. The United States has not yet applied the engagement arguments that worked for China to the North Korean situation. And yet, the core of such a “grand bargain” may well be taking shape in East Asia right now.

An East Asian grand bargain?
The CSCE was built on a grand bargain. In the early 1970s, the Soviet Union wanted its borders internationally recognized (particularly around the Baltics) and more economic trade with the West. West Germany wanted its Ostpolitik grounded in a Europe-wide process of reconciliation. The United States wanted arms control treaties that could reduce what it perceived as a growing Soviet military threat, and certain negotiators also wanted to place human rights on the negotiating table for the first time. A deal ultimately could be reached – according to the three-basket approach of security, economics, and human rights – because everyone got something out of the arrangement, even the “bad guys.”

The CSCE also depended on a convergence of environmental factors. The United States and Soviet Union had embarked on the trajectory of détente built on a foundation of weak, reciprocal dependency.44 Germany was actively engaged in three successive waves of reconciliation: with East Germany, with Eastern Europe, and with the Soviet Union. The Eurocommunist movement in Western Europe promulgated East–West reconciliation; economic reform movements in Eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary) needed financial support from the West. The CSCE was by no means an inevitable agreement. It required skillful and patient diplomacy, and not just an unusual configuration of factors.

Numerous proposals have been made to apply the CSCE model to North-east Asia (from Eduard Shevardnadze and Gareth Evans to Kim Dae Jung and numerous academics). None of these proposals has gathered much more than rhetorical support. The United States has been satisfied with bilateralism; China has traditionally been concerned that a CSCE-like structure could interfere in its sovereign affairs.45 As mentioned above, East Asia is no stranger to transnational organizations. As two scholars quip, “no other region in the world has been carved up into so many transnational units and, yet, has so little capacity to act collectively.”46 The failure to act collectively – to think collectively – has made a CSCE structure seem impossibly remote. And yet, more recently, there seems to be growing support not only within Asia but, as importantly, within the United States for the CSCE model for Asia.
Few would argue for a one-to-one application of the CSCE model to North-east Asia. Europe and Asia have very different historical traditions and very different political realities. Moreover, 2005 is not 1975. Much has happened in the intervening years. Globalization has transformed economic relations; Westphalian notions of sovereignty have become eroded in the post-Cold War period; the human rights movement has become a large global presence. And yet, there are some important experiences that Asia can draw from the CSCE history.

First, the CSCE was an informal structure: a conference that only evolved into an organization twenty years after its founding. Such informality was particularly important in bringing together countries of diverse ideological character. Second, the CSCE model addressed security alongside other issues, which would work well with the economy–security tradeoffs in deals proposed for ending the North Korean nuclear crisis and could prove useful in breaking the current security logjam in the region. The CSCE negotiators addressed the different issues as separate baskets, which avoided the “linkage” that might have derailed agreements. Third, the CSCE provided space for civil society to become engaged in the formulation of foreign policy, through the formation of human rights groups, the insertion of peace movements into the security dialogue, and the activities of universities and cultural organizations on the exchange side. The CSCE was thus an unusual combination of elite negotiations and grass-roots pressure politics, which might work well in a region that has many different levels of civic engagement. Fourth, the structure was appropriately Janus-faced in that it resolved historical issues such as borders yet focused as well on future relationships. Fifth, a CSCE-like model would involve the United States, a country that is, for better or worse, intimately connected to the security affairs of the region. A multilateral structure that excludes the United States is abstractly possible in the security realm (and distinctly possible in the economic realm). But the United States is too much of a military actor in the region to warrant exclusion.

What external factors might push the countries of East Asia toward a multilateral solution to the current security dilemmas in the region? And what rewards might attract the key players to recalculate their threat perceptions and negotiate an agreement in their own self-interest?

In terms of external factors, the core relationship is between the United States and China. Without a significant warming in the relationship between the two countries comparable to the Nixon–Brezhnev rapprochement, multilateralism is a dead issue for the region, at least in the short term. The lukewarm improvement in bilateral relations after September 11 did, after all, make the Six-Party Talks possible. A more robust multilateral structure would require a more thoroughgoing détente. Such a détente would consist of a narrowing of differences concerning North Korea (over the mixture of incentives and sanctions), military questions (arms sales, arms spending), and economic issues (exchange rate, investment abroad). It would require the
return of the “China bashers” to the policy shadows. A positive sign is that
the United States and China are far more interconnected economically than
the United State and Soviet Union ever were. If anything, though, the relation-
ship might be too dependent and has already stimulated a backlash.

Germany’s Ostpolitik finds its parallel in the current “peace and pro-
sperity” policy of Roh Moo-Hyun. But there are some important differences.
First, unlike the consensus that Ostpolitik enjoyed across the political spec-
trum in West Germany, the pro-engagement policies of first Kim Dae Jung
and now Roh Moo-Hyun have not garnered support from conservative
political groups. Such support might not be forthcoming unless and until the
conservatives take control and reshape the engagement policy so that it is
palatable to their constituencies. Second, unlike Germany, South Korea
cannot make dramatic changes in policies to its neighbors through “apology
diplomacy.” As a victim in the region (with the exception of military
involvement in the Vietnam War), South Korea waits on Japan to make
amends. Seoul’s inability to control the pace through dramatic acts of recon-
ciliation has frustrated South Korean efforts to, like Germany, regionalize its
engagement process.

As these examples of US-China and inter-Korean relations suggest,
multilateralism is founded on solid bilateral relationships. It is not an either-
or situation. The question, here, is whether the bilateral relationships are
inclusive or exclusive. Currently, the US relationship with Japan is exclusive.
It is self-contained, relies on threat to bind the two parties more closely, and
increasingly comes at the expense of other bilateral relations in the region,
namely US-South Korean relations. For a multilateral system to become
more likely, more inclusive bilateral relationships are necessary, particularly
between the United States and North Korea, and between Japan and South
Korea.

Relations between Washington and Pyongyang have teetered on the brink
of exclusivity. For the past fifteen years, North Korea has preferred to nego-
tiate directly with the United States. This realpolitik calculation is based on
Washington’s overwhelming military power and the lack of authority the
United States has invested in multilateral structures. To alter Pyongyang’s
calculus, Washington must in effect take multilateralism seriously and not
treat frameworks such as the Six-Party Talks as mere instruments of US
foreign policy. If Washington takes multilateralism seriously, it is more likely
that North Korea will do the same (as the preliminary signs from the fourth
round of Six-Party Talks indicate). The Agreed Framework was largely a
bilateral deal that was then expanded to include other actors. The parties
currently negotiating the nuclear crisis have argued for a much more multi-
lateral approach, not only in the financing of any agreement but in the
negotiating of it as well. The Bush administration, to the extent that it
supports any negotiations with North Korea, supports this multilateral
approach. Normalization of bilateral relations between the two countries,
meanwhile, will eliminate obstacles that stand between North Korea and
engagement regionally and internationally, particularly access to capital and membership in regional and international organizations.

In a similar vein, the kind of cooperation between France and Germany that anchored both the European Community and NATO can only be found in a more inclusive relationship between Japan and South Korea. A more exclusive bilateral relationship focused on countering North Korean and Chinese threats is conceivable, but only if a more conservative government takes over in Seoul. It might well be the case that current disputes between Japan and South Korea (Tokdo, Yasukuni, textbooks) can only be resolved inclusively, in other words with the involvement of other negotiating parties such as China and the United States. As should become clear at this point, exclusive bilateralism revolves around grave threats while inclusive bilateralism points the way toward grand bargains.

The conditions for a multilateral security order in East Asia are not ideal nor are they overwhelmingly prohibitive. The United States and China are wary interlocutors; the two Koreas are engaged in slow-motion reunification; North Korea is desperate for capital to sustain its economic reforms, which requires engagement with Japan and the United States.

For an Asian CSCE to get off the ground, the various parties must perceive significant rewards for their participation that they cannot get bilaterally. China has already signaled its interest in multilateralism: it needs a stable security environment and protected access to energy to sustain its economic growth. North Korea requires of any multilateral effort that it reaffirm the country’s sovereignty and lead to access to international capital. South Korea is looking for a way to embed inter-Korea engagement in a larger regional framework to ensure political and even financial support for gradual reunification. Japan wants three things: (1) territory; (2) a permanent seat on the UN Security Council; and (3) acceptance of its “normal” military. Russia sees multilateralism largely through an economic lens: how to develop its Far East region. Given China’s opposition, Taiwan is unlikely to participate in any regional multilateral framework.

All the East Asian countries have a stake in a multilateral CSCE-like structure. But what of the United States? What could push the Bush administration, which has abandoned even the thin multilateralism of the Powell era, to move away from the propagation of grave threats to an embrace of grand bargains? Three overriding concerns are propelling the Bush administration, against its will, in this direction: (1) terrorism; (2) non-proliferation; and (3) its comparatively waning influence. The more overarching threat of terrorism has already strengthened US relations with Russia and China. The United States might find an Asian CSCE attractive if it took a clear anti-terrorism stance. Second, the United States would embrace a proto-CSCE arrangement if it were built around the elimination of North Korea’s nuclear program. Finally, the United States might endorse such a structure if, as the scenario of increased Europe–Asia cooperation suggested, it felt that it was
being locked out of East Asian developments (in the same way that it pushed APEC in order not to miss out on Asian economic growth).

These three motivations are encouraged by an emerging liberal-conservative consensus in the United States in favor of a regional security mechanism in East Asia. On the “right,” Francis Fukuyama has called for the institutionalization of “Five-Party Talks” that would counter growing nationalism in the region, “channel Chinese ambitions,” and assuage fears of Japan’s new assertive security policy. He takes issue with traditional US indifference to multilateralism in Asia by presenting the best realist case. Even though Fukuyama’s influence in the Bush administration is minimal – he supported Kerry in the last presidential campaign – his views represent an important strain of thinking among US conservatives (and can be found as well in the work of Andrew Bacevich).

On the “left,” meanwhile, James Goodby and Donald Gross make a more formal pitch for the CSCE structure of three baskets covering security, economics and humanitarian concerns. They put the Korean peninsula at the center of their “grand bargain” by arguing that a peace agreement must replace the current armistice arrangement. Their rationale is based largely on the growing alienation of the United States from ongoing trends in the region, exemplified by Washington’s non-invitation to the first East Asia Summit in December 2005 in Malaysia (which is further underlined by the gap between US neo-liberal economic philosophy and the more corporatist East Asian position). Washington’s comparatively waning influence in the region, while a concern for American opinion-makers, may well provide the countries enough space to find their own path to multilateralism. Kurt Campbell has argued that multilateral security initiatives, to have the greatest chance of success in East Asia, must come from the region not from Washington. Fortunately, China has already called for the institutionalization of the Six-Party Talks, so the United States merely has to back the proposal rather than make one of its own.

Integral to the success of any regional structure is not only the benefit that countries get but what they give up as well in exchange. South Korea may well have to give up exclusive claims to Tokdo in exchange for gaining greater regional economic support for inter-Korean reconciliation. Or Japan might have to give up Takeshima in order to gain regional support for its permanent seat on the UN Security Council. The United States will certainly have to get over its distaste for providing economic support to a human-rights abusing regime in North Korea if Pyongyang agrees, finally, to eliminate its nuclear program.

This intricate cost–benefit calculation can certainly take place bilaterally, and so far has done so though without any dramatic breakthroughs. What make CSCE scenarios attractive, as negotiation theory predicts, are the greater range of agreements made possible when more items are on the table. Indeed, the logjams that East Asia currently faces – over contested territory, over North Korean nuclear aspirations, over North Koreans in
China, over history, over non-proliferation policy – may only be resolvable when multiple levels of bargaining can take place.

Although a multilateral security framework in East Asia is likely in the coming years – barring the outbreak of war – its form remains unclear. A structure that overcomes Chinese concerns over sovereignty issues will have to tread carefully on human rights and democratization issues. A structure that gains US support cannot undermine, at least initially, the existing bilateral alliance system. A structure that involves North Korea must include some form of economic engagement. For a three-basket approach to work, the United States and Japan will have to redefine the North Korean and Chinese threats. North Korea will have to redefine the US threat along the lines that China has already done. All the countries in the region will have to perceive concrete benefits from a regional agreement.

Again, the convergence of all these factors is by no means inevitable, just as a “grand bargain” to exit the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula remains difficult and elusive. Even if East Asia does not opt for the full CSCE model, it may find some of the elements outlined above appropriate for its own regional security system.

North-east Asia doesn’t have to wait for the end of the Cold War to establish a CSCE-like structure. The Soviet Union and the United States did not declare in 1975 that they no longer posed a threat to one another. Rather, they transformed their understanding of grave threats and established a framework that eventually contributed to ending the Cold War. North-east Asian countries are on the verge of such a redefinition of threat. If they take the next step and bring a new sense of cooperation to the multi-party negotiating table, they too will be able to establish an organization that can undermine and eventually eliminate the Cold War that persists in the region.

**Notes**

1 In this chapter, I will be discussing multilateral security arrangements more so than multilateral economic agreements. Given the trend toward a “multi-basket” approach, however, it can be difficult to separate the two strands.

2 For the purposes of this chapter, North-east Asia includes the two Koreas, China, Japan, and Russia. The United States, because of its large military presence in the region, is also part of any security understanding of the North-east Asia.

3 Such a fear of anarchy has led some analysts to propose that only a unipolar system, presided over by the United States, can ensure stability. See William Wohlfforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” International Security, Summer 1999, pp. 7–8.

4 On the Pacific Pact history, see Myong-sob Kim, “Declined Invitation by Empire: The Aborted Pacific Pact and the unsolved Issue of Regional Governance,” in Dong-Sung Kim, Ki-Jung Kim, Hahnkyu Park (eds), Fifty Years After the Korean War: From Cold-War Confrontation to Peaceful Co-existence, Seoul: KAIS, 2000. For a recent overview of scholarly arguments, which includes South and South-east Asia, see Amitav Achaya, “Why Is There No NATO in Asia?” May 2005; http://www.iir.ubc.ca/Papers/Acharya-May05.pdf
5 As Derek Chollet argues, without an overarching Soviet threat, “if Asian and U.S. leaders are intent on coming together, they must do more to answer the fundamental question – for what?” See Derek Chollet, “Time for an Asian NATO?” Foreign Policy, March/April 2001, p. 92.

6 Kurt Campbell is one of the more astute proponents of this view. See, for instance, Kurt Campbell, “China’s New Prominence in Asia,” Testimony to Senate Foreign Relations Committee on U.S.-China Relations, 11 September 2003.


[T]here is nothing at all subtle about Chinese “diplomacy.” The Chinese are indeed flexing their muscles, wielding their increasing economic and military clout to demand greater obedience from their neighbors. There is nothing surprising in this. The only surprise is the way the world, including the United States, has in recent years tried to ignore China’s growing belligerence, mesmerized by its economic performance and dreaming of a reformed, postmodern China that can be “integrated” into the global liberal economic order. Some American analysts have even been calling for the erection of new collective security structures in East Asia that would include China. But that rather misses the point. New security structures are needed in East Asia, but they should involve America’s democratic allies, all of whom now share an increasing fear of a China whose rise may or may not be entirely peaceful.


9 President Bush’s meeting with North Korean defector Kang Chol Hwan on 13 June 2005 – a meeting that lasted almost as long as the official state visit of South Korean leader Roh Moo Hyun – underscores the importance of human rights in the administration’s policy toward Pyongyang.


12 There is some evidence that the Bush administration chose the six-party format to put five-party pressure on North Korea only to discover that China and Russia (and to a certain extent South Korea as well) would not play along. In either case, the format was chosen for instrumental reasons rather than to achieve a true multilateral agreement.


20 See, for example, Mark Mazotti, “Chinese Arms Threaten Asia, Rumsfeld Says,” Los Angeles Times, 4 June 2005.
23 America’s Alliances in East Asia, IISS, vol. 11, issue 3, May 2005.
29 Halloran, op. cit.
30 See Daniel Kennelly, “It’s Time for an Amicable Divorce with South Korea,” The American Enterprise, July/August 2005.
34 To a certain extent, Beijing has applied its diplomatic abilities to expanding contacts with Taiwan, but this doesn’t fall within the realm of foreign policy, at least as far as the Mainland is concerned.
35 Ross Terrill, The New Chinese Empire, New York: Basic Books, 2003, p. 253. Terrill quotes Lee approvingly, to suggest that the Singaporean leader got it right thirty years ago and other analysts have been fooled by Beijing’s rhetoric.


The Soviet Union had made a decision after food riots in the early 1960s to provide its citizens with more meat and consumer goods. Hit by poor harvests in the early 1970s, the Soviets became dependent on Western grain. Meanwhile, after the first oil shock of 1973, the West turned to Russia for non-OPEC sources of energy.


Jihwan Hwang argues that this is the crucial factor in “Rethinking the East Asian Balance of Power,” World Affairs, Fall 2003.

Even then, given the economic benefits of engagement with Pyongyang and Beijing and the perils of anti-Japanese nationalist backlash among the population, South Korean conservatives would be wary of forming an exclusive relationship with Japan.


Someday, perhaps, a European-style compromise might be possible along the lines of an “Asia of regions” that would accord Taiwan the same status that the Basque region or Corsica has within the “Europe of regions” defined by the European Union.


It is ironic that the promoter of the “end of history” argument now must support the very kind of institutions that he once derided in order to counter the very kind of threats that he once claimed were largely spent.


Campbell, FPRI, op. cit.

See, for example, the literature on the multilevel negotiations on the multilateral trade agreements in the World Trade Organization.
Chŏn, Sangin, Pukhan minjok chuŭi yŏn’gu (A Study of North Korean Nationalism), Seoul: Minjok t’ongil yo’n’guwo’n, 1994.
“DPRK Statement at UN Attacks US Unilateralism,” CanKor no. 181, 1 October 2004; http://www.cankor.ligi.ubc.ca/issues/181.htm#three


Scobell, Andrew, China and North Korea: From Comrades-in-Arms to Allies at Arm’s Length, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, March 2004.


Shambaugh, David, “Rising Dragon and the American Eagle,” YaleGlobal Online, 20 April 2005


Wang, Yizhou, “Mianxiang ershi shiji de Zhongguo waijiao: sanzhong xuqiu de xunxiu jiqi pingheng (China’s Diplomacy for the Twenty-First Century: Seeking and Balancing Three Demands),” Zhanlue yu guanli (Strategy and Management), no. 6, 1999.