

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

Incorrect Assumptions: A Critical Review of U.S. Policy Toward North Korea

ELISE M. VANDER VENNET
COURSE 5601
FUNDAMENTALS OF STRATEGIC LOGIC
SEMINAR E

PROFESSOR
DR. MARVIN C. OTT

ADVISOR
COL ROBERT ESKRIDGE

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2002		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2002 to 00-00-2002	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Incorrect Assumptions: A Critical Review of U.S. Policy Toward North Korea				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 14	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Incorrect Assumptions: A Critical Review U.S. Policy Toward North Korea

“...there will always be people in the West who fear that negotiation is the only alternative to war. North Korea has a different view: negotiation is war by other means.”¹

The administration of George W. Bush has been heavily criticized in recent months for slowing progress in the U.S. relationship with North Korea. Upon taking office, the Bush administration called a temporary halt to Clinton’s policy of intensive engagement with North Korea in favor of taking time to reassess the situation, U.S. goals and U.S. national security policy toward North Korea. When the administration announced the outcome of that review in June 2001, some observers suggested Bush had not really made any substantial changes in the overall policy and that the halt from January to June 2001 was therefore even less justified, having served only to alienate both our South Korean allies and our North Korean interlocutors.²

This paper will argue, however, that the Bush foreign policy team was correct in calling for a reassessment of U.S. policy because there were significant flaws in the Clinton/Perry process, particularly with respect to its underlying assumptions about the North Korean regime. Additionally, the limited engagement policy proposed by the Bush administration is not simply a Clinton redux. In addition to being based on more realistic assumptions about North Korean behavior, it takes a more measured but also a broader approach to achieving U.S. security goals in the region. While both policies suffer from serious flaws due to the absolute incompatibility of U.S. and North Korean long-term goals, the Bush policy is more likely to preserve U.S. interests should engagement fail.

¹ Chuck Downs, *Over the Line* (Washington DC: The American Enterprise Institute Press, 1999), 282.

² Steven Mufson, “U.S. Will Resume Talks With N. Korea; Decision Follows 3-Month Review,” *The Washington Post*, 7 Jun 01, sec. A, 1.

A Review of the Clinton Policy

By way of introduction, it should be noted that a U.S. policy of engagement toward North Korea did not originate with the Clinton administration. Both the Reagan and the Bush I administrations made limited efforts prior to Clinton taking office. But the reason for the focus on the Clinton administration policy is that it marked a significant expansion over the efforts of previous administrations in the level of U.S. engagement with North Korea.

To a great extent, the increasing engagement during this period was a response to North Korean actions which triggered U.S. and international concern over the North's nuclear and missile programs. The first such episode was in the 1993-94 timeframe, which began with North Korea's threatened withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in response to efforts by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct required inspections of North Korean nuclear facilities. Fearing North Korea's actions would provide it with plutonium for nuclear weapons development as well as irreparably damage the international nonproliferation regime, the Clinton administration engaged in intensive negotiations with North Korea that eventually yielded the 1994 Agreed Framework. Under this agreement, the North promised to suspend operation and halt construction of its graphite moderated reactors at two locations in exchange for the United States arranging to provide it with two light water reactors.

For a time following the signing of the Agreed Framework, the situation appeared to have stabilized and the agreement was hailed for successfully freezing the North Korean nuclear program. However, there were continuing problems with funding the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization and its efforts to supply the light water reactors as well as with the agreed-upon provision of heavy fuel oil in the interim until the reactors were completed. Also, North Korea continued to stall on implementing required IAEA inspection provisions at the Yongbyon site and

was suspected of conducting nuclear activities at an additional undeclared underground facility.³

These concerns were already beginning to prompt calls for a reevaluation of U.S. policy when the world was faced with the North's next provocation. In August of 1998, Pyongyang launched a 3-stage Taepo Dong missile over Japan. Despite North Korean protestations that the purpose of the missile launch was to place a satellite in orbit, it clearly demonstrated a greater degree of advancement in missile technology than U.S. and allied intelligence agencies had to that point assessed.⁴ In response to the launch, which shocked the United States and its Asian partners (Japan in particular), President Clinton appointed former Defense Secretary William Perry to review U.S. policy toward North Korea, effect appropriate coordination with U.S. allies in the region, and provide recommendations for the future direction of U.S. policy.⁵

The Perry report, delivered in October 1999, included a comprehensive review of the issue. It essentially made the case that North Korea was pursuing its nuclear and missile programs in response to the threat it perceived to its own security from the United States and South Korea and that the regime in Pyongyang could be persuaded to forego these programs in return for reciprocal actions by the United States and its allies to address the North's security concerns. Further, it determined that North Korean acquisition of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles would undermine deterrence on the Korean peninsula and that, therefore, the objective of U.S. policy toward North Korea should be to end these programs. It also postulated that if the situation were not addressed intensively in the

³ Larry A. Niksch, *North Korea's Nuclear Weapons Program*, (Washington DC: The Library of Congress, 14 May 2001), IB91141, 2.

⁴ Robert D. Walpole, "North Korea's Taepo Dong Launch and Some Implications on the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States," (paper presented by the National Intelligence Officer for Strategic and Nuclear Programs at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington DC, 8 December 1998); available from http://www.cia.gov/cia/public_affairs/speeches/archives/1998/walpole_speech_120898.html; Internet.

⁵ Michael Dutra and Gaurav Kampani, "The Forthcoming Perry Report," (Monterey Institute of International Studies, Center for Nonproliferation Studies), accessed 7 Sep 01; available from <http://cns.miis.edu/research/korea/perry.htm>; Internet.

near term, there was a distinct possibility of another crisis similar to the one in 1993-94 that could spark some sort of direct confrontation.⁶ The report noted the potential for involvement by both Russia and China, but focused more particularly on U.S. allies, strongly advocating the need to coordinate policy with South Korea and Japan.

In response to these considerations, Perry suggested a two-path strategy -- intensive engagement, with the promise of increasing diplomatic and economic rewards for progress toward restriction or elimination of the North's nuclear and missile programs or, if North Korea failed to cooperate on these security issues, containment.⁷ The first path of the Perry strategy, then, was the policy pursued by the Clinton administration in its waning months, a strategy which built on assumptions and policies already in place, but which justified an intensified pursuit of engagement due to the perceived threat of an impending crisis which would threaten stability on the Korean peninsula.

The Need for a Policy Reassessment

There were, however, a number of major problems with the Clinton policy of intensive engagement with North Korea. First, the Perry report and the earlier policies of the Clinton administration were built on faulty assumptions with regard to the regime in Pyongyang and the requirements for stability on the Korean peninsula. These errors led to a policy narrowly focused on the North's nuclear and missile program. Second, the administration failed to recognize and appropriately deal with North Korea's negotiating behavior, which allowed the North to use the singular U.S. focus as a point of leverage to their distinct advantage. And finally, the administration failed to stringently execute their own stated requirements with respect to verification of North Korean compliance with its required actions under the agreements; it failed to move to "path two"

⁶ Department of State, *Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations*, Unclassified Report by Dr. William J. Perry, Washington D.C., October 12, 1999, hereafter referred to as the Perry Report.

⁷ Ibid.

when the path of engagement was failing.

The first point of critique of the Clinton policy is an assessment of the assumptions on which it was built, since strategy and the resources used to carry it out are necessarily built on assumptions about the adversary and the international situation. First, and probably most important in this instance, is an assessment of the adversary, the regime of Kim Chong Il. Kim leads a totalitarian regime with nearly complete control over the landmass and population of North Korea. It is motivated primarily by the desire to remain in control of the country and to ensure regime survival and the survival of the nation. An extension of that goal is a bid to gain international legitimacy and prestige, long denied to North Korea. The North's outreach in recent years to the rest of the world must therefore be seen in light of these vital interests, not as an end in itself or as some sort of benign transformation of the regime, but as an effort to gain legitimacy and international aid in order to assure its own survival and control. This was one error made by the Clinton team, which took a more idealistic view of the North's goals and actions than can justifiably be ascribed to the Kim regime.

North Korea retains as its other vital interest a goal of unification of the peninsula under a "Kimist" regime. In the euphoria of the 2000 summit, the initial family reunifications and promises of further cooperation, many were quick to accept the idea that the North was finally ready to come to peaceful terms with its Southern neighbor. However, this optimism was unwarranted, as events of the past year have borne out. Since the initial burst of activity, Kim Chong Il studiously backed away from further interaction with the South, rejecting additional reunions, stalling on the North-South railway, and deferring decisions on a visit to Seoul. Additionally, and often ignored by many commentators, the North has been completely unwilling to consider reductions or confidence-building measures involving the conventional military forces arrayed along the Korean border. In fact, the North has improved its military posture, continuing its unabated buildup of offensive forces in the area immediately adjacent to the demilitarized zone. According to the Commander of United States Forces Korea in his March 2001 testimony to Congress, "North Korea still poses a major

threat to stability and security in the region and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future.

Kim Chong-il stubbornly adheres to his "military first" policy, pouring huge amounts of his budget resources into the military, at the expense of the civil sector, as he continues his military buildup. As a result, his military forces are *bigger, better, closer, and deadlier* since last year's testimony."⁸

Another important element of North Korean power is its nuclear and missile programs. These programs provide North Korea with significant capabilities which may, in fact, have the ability to influence or even deter U.S. and allied actions on the peninsula. Yet the Clinton administration's fixation on these programs provided North Korea with even more coercive power -- on the diplomatic front -- than the weapons are worth from a military standpoint. The assumption underlying the Perry process was that North Korean development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles would threaten stability by weakening deterrence on the Korean peninsula and that, therefore, the objective of U.S. policy should be to eliminate these programs.⁹ Yet it is far from clear that this assumption is true.

First, inherent in this assumption was another assumption: that North Korea did not already possess nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. This was not likely the case. Many commentators assume that North Korea already has acquired sufficient plutonium for one or two nuclear weapons.¹⁰ Given the North's continued success in blocking IAEA inspectors from accounting for all of its plutonium, the diversion of plutonium to weapons production must be considered a distinct possibility. There are also reports that North Korea is conducting nuclear weapons-related activities

⁸ Statement of General Thomas A. Schwartz, Commander in Chief, United Nations Command/Command Forces Command and Commander, United States Forces Korea, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 27 March 2001; accessed on 16 Sep 01; available from <http://www.korea.army.mil/pao/news>; Internet

⁹ Perry report.

¹⁰ Niksch, 3-4.

at additional undeclared sites, despite its past commitments not to do so.¹¹ And, though it is currently observing a moratorium on the flight testing of long-range missiles, North Korea already possesses missiles which can range all of Korea and to Japan, and it is continuing development (short of flight testing) of its longer-range missiles. One must therefore consider it likely that North Korea already possesses deliverable nuclear weapons. If so, it has apparently not weakened deterrence as Perry had assumed, as evidenced by the lack of conflict on the Korea peninsula.

Perry may also have had in mind a scenario in which North Korea was able to threaten not only our allies, but the continental United States as well once it completed development of its long-range missiles. North Korean development of a long-range delivery system for nuclear weapons would certainly complicate the task of U.S. political and military leaders dealing with a confrontation in Korea. And North Korea may believe that possession of such weapons would deter the U.S. or the Republic of Korea (ROK) from offensive action. But deterrence of North Korean aggression is not a function of the weapons the North possesses, rather of the threats the U.S. and its allies can bring to bear against the North. This hasn't changed. Even without considering the use of U.S. nuclear weapons, the U.S. and its coalition partners have the wherewithal to threaten the existence of the North Korean regime, its supreme national interest. The fact that superior U.S. and ROK military forces have deterred North Korea for over fifty years is not altered by the North's possession of nuclear weapons as Perry assumed.

Nonetheless, this belief of the Clinton administration, as well as its concern about Pyongyang's export of missile technology, led to a policy almost exclusively focused on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, a direction which played directly into Pyongyang's hands and the North Korea tactic of creating crises to gain leverage against more powerful opponents. In his enlightening work, Negotiating on the Edge, Scott Snyder elucidates the extremely complex subject of North Korean

¹¹ Ibid, 2.

negotiating behavior, tracing it back to historical and cultural roots, and cataloguing specific North Korean negotiating tactics, including crisis diplomacy, brinkmanship, and creating leverage out of weakness.¹² Citing the 1993-94 nuclear crisis and the 1998 Taepo-Dong launch as examples, Snyder chronicles how the North Koreans used self-generated crises to gain attention and then shape the context of negotiations to achieve specific economic or diplomatic ends.¹³ For example, the series of nuclear crises in the early 1990s propelled the U.S. into negotiations with the North, fulfilling in the act of the negotiations themselves a long-standing North Korean goal of direct relations with the United States and earning Kim increased stature in the international arena.

The almost exclusive Clinton/Perry focus on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, therefore, had the no doubt unintended, but predictable, consequence of reinforcing the value of these programs. A North Korea without weapons of mass destruction (WMD) would simply be a failed, irrelevant state, yet another contradiction to Perry's assumptions. Under no circumstances could the North be persuaded to give up the one attribute that guarantees its highest national interests. Additionally, these programs, and Pyongyang's skill at leveraging them when and as needed, garnered not only economic aid but diplomatic status as well, an unintended lesson which was probably not lost on other nuclear aspirants. Ultimately, the Perry report's erroneous assumptions about the North's nuclear and missile programs were its most serious flaws, for they led to a strategy completely mismatched to the situation at hand, trying to persuade a state which already had nuclear weapons not to develop them and seeking a goal -- their elimination -- that the regime could never countenance.

Finally, though the Perry report stated the need for a "second path" should engagement fail, the

¹² Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge, North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), 68.

¹³ Ibid, pp 68-75.

Clinton administration was unable or unwilling to pursue this road as evidence mounted that the Agreed Framework and relations with North Korea were stagnating. One reason for this was the dynamic of coordinating policy with our regional allies. Both Japan, which feared North Korea's missile capabilities, and President Kim Dae Jung, eager to pursue his "Sunshine Policy," were unwilling to retreat from the path of engagement. In addition to Perry's recommendation that the U.S. act in concert with its allies in these efforts, the U.S. simply could not pursue the path of containment unilaterally. So, despite mounting evidence of significant impasses in implementation of the nuclear agreements, the U.S. continued to provide benefits to the North. And it nearly handed Kim the diplomatic coup of a Presidential visit to Pyongyang as it pursued a last-ditch attempt to secure an agreement limiting Pyongyang's missile development and exports. This final overreach by the Clinton administration set the stage for Bush's retrenchment.

Merits of the Bush Policy

As the Bush administration conducted its review of North Korea policy upon taking office in January 2001, it was motivated by several factors, including the presence in the administration of realists who generally regarded North Korea with a more skeptical eye and concern over the rapid pace of events toward the end of the Clinton presidency. Given continued difficulties with implementation of the Agreed Framework, suspicion of covert nuclear weapons development, and no apparent halt to missile research and development or sales, there was little evidence that the efforts of the U.S., South Korea, and the international community throughout the 1990s had prompted any significant change in North Korea's internal and external policies, and in fact, there was concern that the North had actually emerged in a strengthened position. The Bush administration determined there was a need for change in the U.S. policy toward North Korea.

For now, Bush appears to be returning to a more limited pre-Clinton level of engagement with North Korea. Additionally, the Bush administration is taking more of a realistic approach to dealing with North Korea, stating openly their suspicion of Kim Chong Il's motives and commitment to real

progress on the peninsula.¹⁴ It appears the Bush national security team has made a more correct assessment of the true goals of the Kim regime and it may be that their realistic approach will help this administration in maintaining resolve in the face of the North's crisis diplomacy and brinkmanship, an absolutely essential attribute in dealing with North Korean negotiating behavior.¹⁵

Bush has also broadened the scope of his policy focus to include the North's conventional military forces. Clinton's focus on nuclear and missile programs neglected the North's conventional forces and its stated goal of reunification, which actually present the most significant current threats to stability. While conventional deterrence has worked for fifty years, it is clear that the U.S. long-term objective must be the reduction of tensions or sufficient rapprochement on the peninsula to pursue normalization of relations between the Koreas and within the region. A key aspect of this is a focus on reducing the conventional force posture on both sides as well as rolling back the nuclear and missile programs. Where Clinton gave nonproliferation objectives highest priority among American interests, the Bush administration is postured to take a more balanced and broader approach to the security relationship with North Korea.¹⁶

This broader focus has the added benefit of reducing the perceived value of the North's nuclear and missile programs and regaining some leverage in future negotiations. The administration should consider taking an additional step to further devalue the North's nuclear and missile programs. It should openly acknowledge the assumption that North Korea already possesses nuclear weapons and delivery systems. And it should maintain and clearly communicate a coherent strategy to deter their

¹⁴ Alex Wagner, "Bush Outlines Terms for Resuming Talks with North Korea," *Arms Control Today*, Jul/Aug 2001, p 23.

¹⁵ Downs, 14.

¹⁶ Pritchard, Charles L. "U.S. Policy Toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," Testimony before the Subcommittee on East Asia and the Pacific, House Committee on International Relations, Washington DC, 26 Jul 01; accessed on 7 Sep 01; available from <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2001/index.cfm?docid=4304>; Internet.

use. In doing so, the Bush administration will be able to shift the focus of policy from nonproliferation to counterproliferation, using the well-known tools of deterrence and containment to deal with North Korea's military threats. Not only will this reduce the North's ability to use these programs as leverage, but it may help defuse the logjam and potential future crisis over the IAEA special inspections as well.

Finally, the Clinton administration made little progress in verifying implementation of North Korean commitments. The most notorious example is the continued North Korean refusal to discuss implementation of required IAEA inspections, which poses a serious obstacle to verifying their claims of the non-diversion of fissile material. It remains to be seen whether the Bush administration will be able execute viable verification options in the face of North Korean intransigence, but the commitment to do so -- and to withhold benefits if compliance is not forthcoming -- will provide a much-needed and previously missing tool to compel North Korean compliance. This will act as a complement to the economic and diplomatic incentives which have thus far focused on persuasion and North Korean cooperation.

Already evident is one of the potential tactical gains to be realized from the Bush administration's pause in engagement, regaining some leverage and initiative in negotiations. While the Clinton policy was largely reactive to North Korean actions, the U.S. has to some extent regained the initiative. The administration laid out its new policy, clearly stated its agenda and invited North Korea back to the negotiating table, offering to continue the Perry process if they see tangible progress toward improved relations. For now, it is up to Pyongyang to respond. The U.S. has also reinvigorated its coordination with its allies, apparently providing (at least for the time being) a more unified front in dealing with the North. However, the earlier halt in engagement demonstrated to North Korea that the U.S. is not afraid to walk away from the process temporarily -- or permanently -- and even to the dismay of its allies, if the North refuses to participate on terms agreeable to both sides. Thus Bush's retrenchment was an important show of strength that shored up the U.S. position

as the administration begins to reengage North Korea on relevant security issues.

Though the Bush approach toward North Korea shows promise as a more realistic policy based on more realistic assumptions, it is at risk if the administration fails to learn the lessons of the long history of North Korean negotiating behavior as it continues to pursue even limited engagement with this reclusive regime. A clear view of North Korea goals and the tactic of using negotiations as an end in themselves is essential to future success in countering North Korean threats while encouraging the regime to adhere to international norms of state behavior.

Finally, this administration should recognize that even their more realistic, more limited policy of engagement may bear little fruit with the North Korean regime, given the fundamentally incompatible interests of the United States and North Korea. In order to ensure its survival and reunification of the country on its own terms, North Korea must ultimately remove U.S. forces and protection from the peninsula. So far, neither threats and intimidation, nor the appearance of reconciliation have managed to accomplish that goal. But neither has the U.S. been able to achieve its goals of a more stable region and normalized relations on the peninsula, either through containment or through intensive engagement. For the North Korean strategy to work, the U.S. must depart the peninsula. For the U.S. strategy to work, North Korea must give up the weapons of mass destruction and the conventional forces which not only assure its regime survival, but which hold the key to reunification of the peninsula on its terms. Neither outcome is likely in the near future. Ultimately, these goals are fundamentally at odds with each other and are probably not achievable through either limited or intensive engagement, without a radical change in the North Korean regime. The benefit of the Bush policy, however, is that it leaves the United States in a less dangerous position should engagement completely fail. Rather than strengthening the regime with continued economic and diplomatic benefits, it will provide tangible rewards only in return for tangible reductions in the North Korean threat.

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