The Failure of U.S. Coercive Diplomacy Towards North Korea

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Introduction

It has been just over three decades since U.S. intelligence discovered the clandestine nuclear developments of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), commonly called North Korea. Since then, the U.S. has been trying to bring about the dismantlement of the North’s nuclear program through the strategy of coercive diplomacy. In the words of Alexander L. George, coercive diplomacy “seeks to persuade an opponent to cease his aggression rather than bludgeon him into stopping.”\(^1\) By its very definition, this strategy is an alternative to war; it utilizes the threat of force rather than brute force to coerce a target. Indeed, there has been no war between North Korea and the U.S. since the Korean War ended 60 years ago. Yet the North has not only continued to advance its nuclear program, but has commenced a ballistic missile program, illicit arms trading, narcotics dealing, and currency counterfeiting. It also continues to commit egregious violations of the human rights of its citizens. Thus, concerning the goal of denuclearization, the U.S. has failed. Without a resolution to the nuclear concern, the additional issues have exacerbated regional insecurity. Obama is currently the fifth American president to attempt to persuade the North Korean regime to denuclearize. But what if North Korea cannot be persuaded?

This thesis seeks to answer the question of why we have failed. It seems puzzling that a country as militarily, economically, and politically powerful as the U.S. would be unable to coerce a tiny failing state such as North Korea. Moreover, the U.S. has provided $1.3 billion in aid to North Korea as it has simultaneously sought to change the

regime’s behavior. Still, the North Korean regime has outlasted numerous predictions of its collapse, and no plans for systemic reform appear to be imminent. Answering the question of why the U.S. has failed illuminates the limits, as well as the potential, of U.S. policies. Ultimately, understanding why we have failed helps to answer the question of what should we do?

In my thesis I argue that U.S. policy has failed because it has pursued an unattainable objective. I argue that the North Korean regime will never willingly denuclearize, and thus, any strategy that leaves the target’s free will intact is doomed to failure. Assessing the information known about the regime, as well as the record of its actions, I contend that its nuclear aspirations are the result of internal motivation, not external. So while U.S. policies are not irrelevant to North Korean decision-making, they do not impact Pyongyang in the way the U.S. intends them to. The regime’s survival depends upon possessing nuclear weapons, antagonizing the U.S., creating crises, and avoiding reform. While the U.S. is indeed responsible for policies that have been inconsistent, and for strategies that were inadequately implemented, as Stephen Bradner points out: “they are not the problem, but only symptoms of the problem.” The ‘problem’ is that the regime cannot afford to denuclearize.

The structure of my argument will proceed as follows. The first chapter introduces coercive diplomacy and rogue regimes. It first defines coercive diplomacy as a strategy, and illuminates its limitations. It then explains how a rogue target poses further obstacles to success. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it clarifies what has

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been attempted, in order to contextualize a proper analysis of past policy. Second, it emphasizes that coercive diplomacy is a very difficult strategy to realize, and is even less likely to be effective when faced with a target classified as ‘rogue.’ These difficulties will help to later explain its failure in the case of North Korea.

The second chapter provides a historical background of the DPRK. The history featured ranges from the Japanese occupation of Korea (1905 – 1945) up until the 1980’s, when the North’s covert nuclear activity was first discovered. Understanding North Korea’s history is imperative to understanding the current policy dilemma it poses. It helps explain how the regime is currently trapped in a system that cannot be reformed without breaking apart completely. This clarifies why attempting to coerce the regime will not work.

The third chapter focuses on the U.S.-DPRK dynamic from the Reagan administration through that of Obama. This chapter examines the course of events that transpired, as well as analyzes the policies that were formed in response. A closer examination of this relationship demonstrates that the U.S. has been locked into a pattern crafted by DPRK strategy. In this pattern, North Korea initiates a provocation and then uses steps towards denuclearization, or even steps towards negotiating denuclearization, as bargaining chips for its own gain. In response to what appeared to be unpredictable behavior, U.S. policy has vacillated between a more aggressively coercive approach and a more conciliatory, engagement-focused approach. However, the pattern remains, and has only manifested more blatantly in recent years. The fact that a pattern exists at all and has persisted for so long indicates the limited efficacy of coercive diplomacy towards North Korea, regardless of the specific balance between carrot and stick.
In the fourth and final chapter, I address the policy debate over how to assess the North Korean threat. The question of whether the regime’s motivation can be characterized as inherently offensive or defensive has shaped U.S. policy-making since the first nuclear crisis. The appropriate policy response varies considerably depending upon which conclusion is reached. This chapter evaluates each perspective, but provides an argument as to why the regime should be seen through the lens of offensive realism. I conclude with my contention that the regime will never willingly denuclearize, therefore the U.S. must choose a different policy, that does not maintain the target’s free will, or it must change its objective entirely.

Though my analysis may seem pessimistic, I do not believe the situation is hopeless. Recognizing and acknowledging that the U.S. has been employing an unworkable strategy could, alternatively, hold a very optimistic implication for the future. Neither the threat of force, nor inducements, would change Pyongyang’s behavior because both seek for the regime to willingly do something it will never willingly do. If American policy-makers accept this, they could begin to consider other means of pursuing non-proliferation, regional stability, and relief for North Korean citizens.
Chapter One: Coercive Diplomacy and Rogue Regimes

The U.S. has been attempting to persuade North Korea to denuclearize through coercive diplomacy ever since the first nuclear crisis in the early 1990’s. A very appealing strategy, coercive diplomacy seeks to employ the threat of force, or the limited use of force, to compel an opponent, rather than resort to the extremely costly affair of all-out war. Considering the military might of the U.S., it is reasonable to suppose that a state wielding such military power could easily intimidate a weaker state into concession. And yet, the U.S.’s track record with coercive diplomacy is less than inspiring; a few successes, several notable failures, and some cases ambiguously in between. Despite grave concerns of sparking an actual war, the U.S. and North Korea have evaded open military conflict. Yet, coercive diplomacy has not succeeded in convincing the North Korean regime to dismantle its nuclear program. Therefore, the U.S. has not failed in that it has resorted to war, but it has failed to realize its objective. In order to explain this failure, we must first examine the strategy itself.

This chapter provides an overview of coercive diplomacy and the prominent theories behind it, as well as some of its deficits. It also addresses the complications that arise when dealing with targets that do not adhere to international norms, as in the case of ‘rogue’ regimes. Understanding the strategy employed by the U.S., and the limits of such a strategy, will help to answer a central underlying question: did the U.S. fail to properly execute coercive diplomacy on North Korea, or was it a strategy altogether unfit for the situation? If the U.S. failed to properly employ coercive diplomacy, then a renewed approach, with a better understanding of the strategy and the opponent, might prove
successful in the future. If, however, coercive diplomacy has encountered an insurmountable obstacle in North Korea, as I argue to be the case, then the U.S. must cease this approach and devise a new strategy altogether.

I. Theories of Coercive Diplomacy

Coercive diplomacy is but one of many options for attempting to influence the actions of another state. When a coercer state wishes to bring about its objectives while sparing as much cost as possible, it can turn to threat-based methods as alternatives to war. Lawrence Freedman defines the broad term of ‘strategic coercion’ as: “the deliberate and purposive use of overt threats to influence another’s strategic choices.” But threats may be used for different objectives, demanding either action or inaction from the target. To clarify this issue, Thomas Shelling identified a distinction between deterrence and compellence.

Deterrence aims to prevent the target from taking a certain action. The enforcing state fears that the target may engage in unwanted behavior, and seeks to ensure that it will not. Notably, this requires an indefinite period of waiting to ensure that the deterrent strategy has been successful. In addition to an uncertain cutoff date, it is difficult to evaluate the efficacy of deterrence. The reasons for an absence of action are ambiguous: it is hard to say what was the result of the deterrent strategy and what was the result of other factors. However, an advantage of deterrence is that it requires less bending of the

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target’s will. The target has the opportunity to concede to the desire of the coercer state without necessarily losing face.

Compellence, conversely, stipulates an active response: the target must either initiate a new action, or cease an action in which it is already engaged. Where deterrence seeks to maintain the status quo, compellence seeks a discernable change. Thus, the results are more noticeable, but much more difficult to realize.

Freedman concludes that strategic coercion is inherently difficult because the target state is left with the freedom of choice. Brute force leaves no freedom of choice, so although it is costly to the coercer, it retains a higher degree of control. With the use of brute force, the target is militarily defeated, and its will is of no consequence. Alternatively, if the target state shares the enforcer state’s motive or will, it will freely consent; no coercion is required. Strategic coercion is aimed at the in-between cases. The target state must act against its will in some way, but unlike the case of military defeat, it is left with a degree of free will at the conclusion. Freedman asserts that the difficulty of strategic coercion lies in the fact that it is, “dependent on an appreciation of how the target constructs reality and its likely responsiveness to alternative forms of pressure.”

The voluntary aspect of the target’s response connotes that influence by the coercer state is only one contributing factor, among many, to be considered by the target.

George distinguishes coercive diplomacy as a defensive variety of compellence, distinct from blackmail, the offensive variety. According to George, blackmail utilizes threat to compel the target to initiate a new action, whereas the defensive ‘coercive

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diplomacy’ wills the target to cease or retract an action. However this is a point on which several other theorists deviate; they do not see coercive diplomacy as inherently defensive. Peter Jakobsen, among others, argues that this categorization “rests on the assumption that the status quo by definition is legitimate, and that all changes to it are wrong.” Essentially, what the coercing state sees as defensive compellence may be perceived as offensive to the target. If the target feels that the status quo is unacceptable, any action taken to prevent it from modifying the status quo, though reactive, can be regarded as offensive in nature. Thus, the two forms of strategic coercion are not always starkly distinct. What more precisely distinguishes coercive diplomacy is the unique combination of coercion and diplomacy.

The diplomatic side of coercive diplomacy refers to the fact that it does not depend exclusively on military force, and often involves a grouping of ‘carrots and sticks’. What is crucial about this point is that resorting to war indicates a failure of coercive diplomacy. As Schelling describes, the difference between brute force and coercion is the difference “between taking what you want and making someone give it to you.” Here, war would be simply ‘taking’. Conversely, diplomacy requires no use of force. Perhaps Schelling best defines coercive diplomacy as follows: “To be coercive, violence has to be anticipated. And it has to be avoidable by accommodation. The power

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7 Ibid.
to hurt is bargaining power. To exploit it is diplomacy – vicious diplomacy, but

diplomacy.”

This definition provides us a working base to understand the theory behind the
strategy. The purpose of coercive diplomacy is to effectively manipulate the threat of
force in a diplomatic way, in order to compel the target into taking action it would have
otherwise not chosen. This is a very difficult task, with tremendous stakes for the coercer.

George set out four questions to be considered when forming a strategy. These are:

1. What to demand of the opponent
2. Whether and how to create a sense of urgency for compliance with the demand
3. Whether and what kind of punishment to threaten for non-compliance
4. Whether to also offer positive inducements and, if so, what ‘carrot’ to offer
together with the ‘stick’ to induce acceptance of the demand

George also describes several variants of coercive diplomacy strategy that are
distinguishable by which of these variables are present. First is the classic ultimatum,
which establishes a demand, a deadline, and the threat of punishment for noncompliance.
The ‘tacit’ ultimatum lacks an overtly stated deadline, but a sense of urgency is
nonetheless conveyed through alternate means. A ‘try-and-see’ strategy only expresses
the demand of the target; there is no deadline, and no threat of punishment. The ‘gradual
turning of the screw’ approach describes the process of incrementally increasing pressure,
but also lacks an explicit deadline. All of these variants thus far answer the first three of
George’s questions, and focus only on employing the threat of force. The fourth
component applies to the ‘carrot-and-stick’ approach, on which George notes: “what the
threatened stick cannot achieve by itself…may possibly be achieved by combining it with

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9 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 1.
10 George, Forceful Persuasion, 7.
a carrot,” however, it is essential that, “the positive inducements and reassurances offered be credible.”\textsuperscript{11}

George and William Simons also classify fourteen factors to be considered in devising a strategy of coercive diplomacy, five contextual variables and nine conditions, more likely to produce a successful outcome. These include:

1. Clarity of objective;
2. Strength of motivation;
3. Asymmetry of motivation;
4. Sense of urgency;
5. Strong leadership
6. Domestic support
7. International support;
8. Opponent’s fear of unacceptable escalation;
9. Clarity concerning the precise terms of settlement of the crisis\textsuperscript{12}

Peter Jakobsen sought to rectify what he saw as several deficits in the framework laid out by George and Simons. Notably, many of the aforementioned conditions favorable to success can only be analyzed post factum. Jakobsen also noted that the high degree of intricacy makes practical use of the numerous variables difficult. In response, he identified his own ‘ideal policy’ to maximize the chances of success, comprised of the following:

1. A threat of force to defeat the opponent or deny him his objectives quickly with little cost, backed by the necessary capability;
2. A deadline for compliance;
3. An assurance to the adversary against future demands;
4. An offer of carrots for compliance\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} George, Forceful Persuasion, 11.
Jakobsen felt that narrowing the scope of the framework would make it easier to identify the causes of success and failure, though he acknowledges that this also limits his theory’s range of applicability. His framework does not require much knowledge or understanding of the opponent, a feature that Jakobsen considers to be an advantage. He explains the reasoning for this is: “It rests on the claim that one can explain and predict outcomes of coercive diplomacy attempts against aggressors by focusing on the policy pursued by the coercer and black boxing the opponent.”

Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman seem to disagree, and pursue a different approach. They attribute success to a thorough understanding of the target, and recommend seeking an adversary’s specific “pressure points”, as well as achieving “escalation dominance.” A target’s pressure points are its most vital areas that are also weak spots, i.e. “areas the adversary cannot impenetrably guard.” For example, in democratic states where politicians depend upon support from the populace for reelection, a coercive strategy that sways popular opinion, perhaps by targeting the economy, might effectively intimidate the policy-makers into compliance.

Escalation dominance describes a situation in which the coercer-state possesses “the ability to increase the threatened costs to an adversary while denying the adversary the opportunity to neutralize those costs or to counterescalate.” The target state must be

16 Ibid.
rendered unable to adapt to the situation created by pressure from the coercer state, and it must be denied the opportunity to counterescalate.

Byman and Waxman also identify an array of coercive mechanisms and coercive instruments. The mechanisms are common tactics such as:

- threatening a regime’s relationship with its core supporters;
- creating popular dissatisfaction with a regime;
- decapitation – jeopardizing a leadership’s personal security;
- weakening – debilitating the country as a whole;
- denial – preventing battlefield success (or political victories via military aggression.)

The instruments of coercive diplomacy refer to the ‘tools of the trade,’ an example being gunboat diplomacy used by the British against their colonies.

The variety and variance in the literature on coercive diplomacy suggests one point quite clearly: coercive diplomacy is very difficult to theorize and to strategize. The contributions of prominent theorists overlap at times and diverge at others, and there seems to be an infinite capacity for further specification. We have not reached a point of understanding where inputs can be plugged into an equation for success.

Robert Art and Patrick Cronin address some of the reasons why coercive diplomacy, and compellence more broadly, is intrinsically difficult. It is a strategy that asks the opponent to engage in an act it would have otherwise not have taken, and the potential risk of losing face and power could incur damaging political repercussions for the target domestically and internationally. The threat of force will always reach a limit in terms of potential efficacy, and may easily fail to produce the desired response. Art and Cronin also note that “[r]esolve…is notoriously difficult to estimate before a coercive

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contest begins, and it can change during that contest.” This detail is exacerbated by the fact that an opponent’s resolve may harden over time given the consequences of conceding.

Further problems may arise in situations in which there are multiple coercers, or multiple targets. While coalitions are often thought to be beneficial in coercive diplomacy, they are difficult to manage. Besides the free-rider problem, where one member invests more effort or incurs more risk than the others, coalitions can also introduce the problem of competing strategies from various parties. Even without a coalition, attempting to draw in just one third-party can prove difficult, as this essentially requires compelling the target through compelling a third party. The coercer state must influence the behavior of the third party in order to indirectly influence the behavior of the target. This creates a multiplier effect on all of the problems that arise from compellence in the first place. This particularly holds relevance for the case of the U.S. and North Korea, as the U.S. often appeals to China to apply pressure, given its position of greater influence. Coercing multiple targets is similarly troublesome, as it might necessitate multiple strategies. Furthermore, the initial response of one target might negatively impact the reactions of the others; the others may become inspired by its defiance, or disgusted by its compliance, and strengthen their resolve.

Art and Cronin emphasize that compelling a target is difficult because the target’s reputation is at stake. This helps to explain why greater relative strength does not necessarily guarantee the coercion of a weaker power; greater asymmetry can actually

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further hinder the effect of coercion. Successfully coercing a target to comply is a powerful assertion of dominance; what if the target’s compliance encourages the coercer to ask for more? Todd Sechser notes, “complying with a threat entails reputation costs for the target- costs that are especially high if the target believes that the challenger will exploit its newfound knowledge to make additional demands in the future.”19 A target state cannot know for certain the intentions of the coercer; it must assess the coercer’s capabilities in order to strategize a response. Therefore, the greater asymmetry of power between the coercer and target, the greater the risk to the target that the coercer will continue to pose demands. The target may decide that compliance, even in only one instance, is not worth the costs of opening up the dynamic to such a possibility.

Byman and Waxman take a closer look into some of the many ways in which coercive diplomacy can backfire. They believe that a problem of strategizing lies in the common tendency to analyze case studies of coercive diplomacy with ‘linear logic,’ i.e. assuming a timeline of events where the coercer state acts, and the target reacts, deciding to either concede or resist.20 They argue that this underestimates the dynamic nature of coercive diplomacy, and therefore frequently neglects the potential for backfire. For example, if the coercer pursues a gradual turning of the screw strategy, only incrementally increasing pressure on the target, the target may doubt the urgency, resolve, or credibility of the coercer, or may be able to adapt to the new circumstances. On the other hand, a sudden escalation could provoke an adverse response from the target that produces the opposite of the desired outcome. North Korea, in fact, has proven

remarkably adept at circumventing the effects of coercion, as well as counterescalating tension to regain control over crisis-dynamics.

Considering coercive diplomacy as dynamic involves a more detailed examination of what tools the target has at its disposal. Byman and Waxman discuss at length the many ways a target can actually counter or negate the threat posed by the coercer. In these instances, it is no longer a simple case of the target responding positively or negatively to the threat issued by the coercer. Rather, both coercer and target may engage in acts of coercion. If a target engages in counterescalation, the coercer may be forced to back down. If a target is able to domestically manipulate the public opinion of the coercer, it may experience heightened political support at home. Byman and Waxman explain, “When an adversary can demonstrate to its population or elites that the coercer is backing down or that the coercer too is suffering, then the psychological impact of the pain is lessened.”\footnote{Byman and Waxman, \textit{Dynamics of Coercion}, 43.} If the opponent can maintain public support, or support from its key constituencies, it may have a far milder incentive to concede.

Aside from managing the public reaction to coercion, a target may be able to deny the coercer the ability to escalate pressure in the first place. An example of this can be seen during the Korean War. The U.S. destroyed irrigation dikes to cause flooding and incur costly damage to the North Koreans. However, the North Koreans lowered water levels, effectively rebuffing the attempt to escalate pressure.\footnote{Ibid.}

Though available information on an adversary may be limited, it is crucial to build an understanding of its pressure points in order to create an effective threat, and these pressure points vary considerably by context. As mentioned earlier, a democracy
may be vulnerable to public opinion on specific politicians or policies. Authoritarian
regimes, alternatively, often depend upon their state’s elite as a power base. For this
reason, a strategy intended to diminish public support may have the adverse effect of
hurting civilians while the elite, and the regime, are immune. This can inadvertently
benefit the target, should it decide to exploit the suffering of its civilians in order to
internationally vilify the coercer. It could also rally domestic support, and demonstrate
the regime’s value as a defender against such villainy.

A strategy’s success may lie in locating a target’s pressure points, but obstacles
exist here as well. Byman and Waxman illuminate: “those interests that are most vital to a
regime are likely to be those that the regime is best equipped for (and practiced at)
protecting.”23 For example, a strategy aimed at injuring the relationship between a
dictator and his power base may prove futile if the dictator is accustomed to weeding out
dissent through political purging. Byman and Waxman identify the need to distinguish
between the target’s susceptibility and its vulnerability, a concept borrowed from Robert
O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye. An opponent may possess pressure points that are
susceptible to pressure, but not vulnerable.24 Another problem is that an adversary’s most
vulnerable pressure point might be the one thing the state feels it must protect at all costs.
Thus, targeting something of such value to the state could provoke the most drastic
counterescalatory response.

As later chapters will show, the North Korean regime regularly manipulates and
exploits anti-Americanism as a political tool, and its relationship with the elite is nearly
impenetrable. These traits, along with its infamous tendency to provoke tension and incite

23 Byman and Waxman, Dynamics of Coercion, 45.
24 Ibid, 45.
crises, have enabled it to circumvent coercive attempts and sustain far longer than expected.

II. Coercive Diplomacy and Rogue States

The literature on coercive diplomacy suggests the immense difficulty in theorizing, much less strategizing, which factors contribute to success or failure. There are qualities that render coercive diplomacy difficult by nature, and then there are constraints specific to each case. Even if a strategist can accurately determine an opponent’s pressure points, and all the right conditions and variables, the target still may not behave as expected.

Some states regularly do not behave as expected, known as rogue regimes. Rogue, or renegade, regimes present even further complications for the task of coercive diplomacy. It is challenging for non-rogue states to fully understand the value systems, priorities, and interests of rogues, so they often perceive them as irrational actors. Therefore, the task of determining rogue states’ motivations, and how to manipulate those motivations, becomes daunting. North Korea is classified as a rogue regime, so no evaluation of attempted strategy towards it can ignore how a rogue regime alters the assumptions present in strategizing coercive diplomacy.

To start with, it is actually rather tricky to classify a rogue regime in the first place, and the term is more easily explained through example than by definition. The
Clinton administration identified three criteria to delineate a rogue regime: “the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy, and efforts to threaten or destabilize neighboring states,” and by this rubric, classified Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, and North Korea as rogues.\textsuperscript{25} Theoretically these are states whose behavior marks them as deviant from the norms of the international community. Another definition describes rogue states as those that “show contempt for international norms by repressing their own populations, promoting international terrorism, seeking weapons of mass destruction, and standing outside the international community.”\textsuperscript{26}

However, the term is largely criticized for being ambiguous and subjective. For example, a regime that acquires WMD is only considered rogue when it is not a major power. This is exemplified by the fact that no members of the UN Security Council possessing nuclear weapons are considered to be renegade. Furthermore, international norms are not fixed, and change over time, as in the example of international standards of human rights. In short, defining state behavior as rogue depends largely on cultural/historical context, and the same behavior from different states may be classified as rogue, or not, depending. Miroslav Nincic suggests that identifying regimes as rogue has been deeply affected by circumstance, a notable example being that the U.S.’s identification of rogues in the 1990’s was largely a product of domestic politics and

\textsuperscript{26} Barry Rubin, “U.S. Foreign Policy and Rogue States,” Middle East Review of International Affairs, 3, no. 3 (1999): 72.
foreign policy.\textsuperscript{27} Nincic clarifies that “if the regime is considered a renegade it is because its methods of rule and/or its goals violated normal’s embraced by the bulk of the international community.”\textsuperscript{28} Setting aside the definitional range of what is and is not rogue, as this is a task beyond the scope of this paper, I will work off analyses of shared traits of regimes widely acknowledged to be rogues.

It must first be established that, contrary to popular belief, rogue regimes are not necessarily irrational actors. They may be unique in their goals and values, and possess a higher tolerance for risky and unpopular behavior, but they are often perfectly rational. In fact, projecting an image of irrationality may actually be a decision of strategy, a tactic partaking in the \textit{rationality of irrationality}. In a paper for the International Institute of Strategic Studies, Stephen Maxwell describes this phenomenon as a strategy involving a seemingly irrational action, perhaps one that the state would otherwise have not committed, but entails, “the calculation that after all the risks have been taken into account, the [action] serves some national end, perhaps by deterring a hostile move against a highly valued interest.”\textsuperscript{29} Thus brinkmanship tactics may in fact be strategically implemented to gain leverage. Presuming that rogue regimes are to be considered rational actors, Nincic outlines several assumptions about rogue regimes as a basis for analysis.

The first assumption is that \textit{regimes care most about the security of their domestic position}.\textsuperscript{30} This applies to all regimes, not merely rogues, and does not imply that they lack concern for other objectives as well. However a regime cannot consider other

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Miroslav Nincic, \textit{Renegade Regimes: Confronting Deviant Behavior in World Politics} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 23.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 13.
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Nincic, \textit{Renegade Regimes}, 24.
\end{itemize}
objectives unless it feels secure in its political position. Nincic further elaborates that “[t]he key, then, to understanding renegade regimes is to fathom how their behavior is connected to expected consequences for their domestic security, asking how this may be affected by decisions to embrace or defy core international norms.” There may be instances in which a regime feels that it has more to gain through deviance than through compliance, which relates to the next assumption: *The link between regime position and renegade behavior may be direct or indirect.* A regime may find benefit in behavior or actions that happen to clash with international norms (indirect), or they may find benefit in engaging in behavior that purposefully clashes with international norms (direct).

Finally, another relevant assumption is that *punishment may offset or reconfigure renegade incentives.* According to this assumption, punishment may fail to bring about the desired effect for the reason that the punishment itself may alter the regime’s motivation. Nincic notes:

> external punishment sometimes reinforces, in the short term at least, a regime’s commitment to the behavior that elicited the punishment–for example, because it benefits from a “rally round the flag” as external pressure increases, or because economic interests linked to the external punishment are created.

A regime may find opportunity from external punishment to secure its position domestically. Citizens who might normally oppose the regime might find a common enemy in the punisher, and a savior in the regime. The regime itself could portray dissenters as traitorous, and then justify weeding them out. External punishment can also create new economic prospects. A regime may decide that economic sanctions provide

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32 Ibid.
33 Ibid, 27.
34 Ibid, 28.
justification for turning to (potentially lucrative) illegal commerce. These three assumptions accurately depict the North Korean regime, as will be demonstrated in later chapters.

III. Conclusion

The next chapter will analyze U.S. coercive diplomacy towards North Korea. What should be clear from the presented overview of coercive diplomacy is that it is a strategy that is tremendously difficult to implement successfully. It requires a very delicate balance of conditions and factors in order to achieve success, and there are ample opportunities for the strategy to backfire, leaving the coercer in a worse place than when it started. It should be reemphasized, that the consequences for failed coercive diplomacy could be critically damaging to the coercer state. It faces one option of backing down, which would mean potentially losing future credibility, as well as accepting the continuity of a status quo it finds unacceptable. Its other option is to resort to war, which would incur tremendous costs financially, politically, and diplomatically. Given all these obstacles lying in the way of successful coercive diplomacy, there are plentiful potential causes of failure.

I argue that U.S. policy towards North Korea has failed because it has underestimated the regime’s resolve to become a nuclear state. This miscalculation inspired the notion that the regime could be coerced into changing its behavior. With most states, policy-makers expect certain reactions to various actions; threatening punishment or limited punishment aims to produce in the target a sense that failure to
comply will result in consequences worse than compliance. This logic relies on certain assumptions of how the target attaches value to various consequences. As Schelling describes of coercion in Arms and Influence: “Coercion…requires that our interests and our opponent’s not be absolutely opposed…coercion requires finding a bargain, arranging for him to be better off doing what we want- worse off not doing what we want.”

Unfortunately, a target may never view the costs of punishment as worse than the costs of compliance. This opposition may be attributed to a regime’s irrational paranoia, or it may be motivated by a genuinely dismal domestic position. However, there are instances in which “the perceived costs of giving in are so dreaded that virtually no military threat will compel the adversary to bend.” In some cases, coercion is simply impossible.

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35 Schelling, Arms and Influence, 4.
36 Byman and Waxman, Dynamics of Coercion, 85.
Chapter Two: The Evolution of the DPRK

North Korea is like no place else. It has had the same failing economic system in place, with no significant alteration, for over half a century. It is led by the only socialist, hereditary dynasty, which claims one of the most systemic and omnipresent cults of personality ever seen. Isolated, impoverished, and unable to leave, North Korea’s citizens suffer from rampant malnourishment while their government uses its resources to fund the world’s fourth largest military. Meanwhile, just across the DMZ lies South Korea, a liberal democracy whose economy ranks amongst the world’s top 20 in terms of nominal GDP and purchasing power.

The anomaly of the disparity between the two Koreas is often met with doubt over the rationality, or even sanity, of the North Korean leaders. Such a conclusion is nothing but detrimental to American policy makers. The North Korean regime is neither crazy nor irrational. It simply needs to be understood within its own context. This chapter provides a historical background of the DPRK and how it came to be.

The North’s history has played a major role in the formation of its current condition. First of all, North Korea is a state born out of traumatic circumstance. All of Korea suffered under the particularly brutal Japanese occupation. When Kim Il-sung became the leader of North Korea, he was lauded as a hero for his anti-Japanese guerilla-fighting background. Then, after the Japanese occupation ended, South Koreans were politically repressed under their American protectorate. Kim Il-sung was reinforced as an alternative: a symbol of freedom, independence, and Korean purity. The initial political
freedom and economic progress in the North seemed to confirm the superiority of the communist North Korean system.

When the North’s prosperity began to wane, the Kim regime found that its survival depended upon constantly recalling the golden age of its past, and immortalizing the heroism of Kim Il-sung. This is why North Korea’s ruling ideology called *Juche* came into practice. An inverse relationship developed between the worsening of the North Korean internal situation and the intensification of its ideology. The more the system proved to be flawed, the more the regime relied on indoctrination and coercion in order to pretend it was perfect.

Now, the North Korean regime depends upon its continued insistence that *Juche*, and all Kim leaders, are infallible. It depends upon villainizing the U.S. and claiming superiority over South Korea. This is how the regime stays in power, the motivation behind all decision-making in Pyongyang. History serves as a powerful political tool for the North Korean regime, and thus it is very important to understanding them. Awareness of the DPRK’s history helps to 1) confirm the rationality of its decisions, and 2) illuminate the constraints of its current system that simply do not allow for reform. This, in turn, aids in understanding why North Korea’s nuclear ambitions are independent of, and possibly immune to, the U.S.’s coercive intentions.
I. North Korea Before The Kim Dictatorship

The Japanese occupation of Korea had a profound effect on the political development of the DPRK; in part for how it established Kim Il-sung as a leader, and in part for how it shaped the North Korean response to the ensuing American and Soviet protectorates. Concluding the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, Russia agreed that Korea would fall under the Japanese sphere of influence. Japan annexed Korea five years later and immediately dominated every facet of Korean society. The Japanese took control over Korea’s currency, transport, and communication. They confiscated all Korean farmland and converted it to a tenant-system of farming similar to feudalism. When rapid industrialization of the Japanese economy led to food shortages and inflation, Korean rice was exported to Japan at the cost of the Koreans. Korean consumers were neglected, and Korean farmers lost all the rights to their land. The majority of the Korean population was soon living in abject poverty. Koreans were forced to cease use of the Korean language and change their names to Japanese varieties. Christianity was outlawed. Many Koreans were forced into dangerous and unappealing industrial jobs.

The Japanese also engaged in common practices of extreme racism against the Koreans. For example, the devastation of the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923 contributed to pent up rage within Japanese society that was unleashed onto many scapegoated Korean immigrants. Koreans were charged with invented crimes that allegedly contributed to the destruction of the earthquake, and there were widespread unfounded rumors that Koreans had been poisoning well water. In response, thousands of Koreans were murdered either by angry mobs or by the Japanese authorities.
Japanese abuse of the Korean population continued throughout WWII. Koreans were subjected to forced conscription into the Japanese military. If they refused, they were punished with forced labor in mines and factories. Another brutality of the war was that suffered by the Korean ‘comfort women,’ or Korean women forced into sexual servitude to Japanese troops.

Korean nationalism intensified in response to Japanese brutality. The Japanese became a unifying common enemy for all Koreans to despise. In the five-year span between the announcement of the Japanese occupation and the actual annexation, Korean patriots began to organize a resistance movement. However, the Japanese proved effective at suppressing Korean opposition, so the resistance moved abroad. Communities in Siberia, Manchuria, Shanghai, and Hawaii became centers of Korean defiance, though the various groups were hardly unified in philosophy or plan of action. Recurrently, factionalism weakened the movement, rendering it susceptible to Japanese suppression. There was an undeniable need for one unifying leader to solidify and strengthen the movement, whom the Koreans found in Kim Il-sung.

Kim had grown up in a family of communist nationalists, and was active in the movement from a young age. In 1932 he formed a guerilla unit to fight the Japanese in Manchuria. This evolved into the Anti-Japanese People’s Guerrilla Army, later reformed into the Korean People’s Revolutionary Army. After two decades of aggressively mobilizing the anti-Japanese movement with the intention of preparing for a nation-wide general offensive, the movement never had the chance to prove itself. In 1945 the war ended, Japan surrendered, and a new chapter of Korean history began. This time Korea fell under the jurisdiction of two new larger powers: the U.S. and the Soviet Union.
During WWII, the ‘Korea Question’ had been an object of low importance for the Allies, though it was an issue that had been brought up at several conferences. President Roosevelt and British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden had already begun to form the view that a joint trusteeship would be best, because they felt the Korean people were not yet in a position to govern themselves.

In 1945, the U.S. State Department requested Colonels Rusk and Bonesteel to divide the Korean peninsula in a manner that would include Seoul in the U.S.’s half in order to, “harmonize the political desire of the U.S. with ‘the ability of the U.S. forces to reach the area.”37 Unfortunately, the rather arbitrary choice of the 38th parallel was decided ignorant of the fact that most of the country’s industries were located in the north, while much of its agriculture lay in the south. This presented the two sides with an enormous economic disparity in the years immediately following the division, which contributed to the North’s confidence in the viability of socialism. Ironically, the commanding general of the U.S. occupation forces in Korea, General John R. Hodge, two weeks after his arrival wrote a rather astute prediction: “In my opinion the Allied Powers, by this division, have created a situation impossible of peaceful correction.”38

The trusteeship of the U.S. in the South differed dramatically from that of the Soviets in the North, especially concerning Korean politics. Directly following the Japanese surrender, a man named Yo Un-hyong established the Preparation Committee for the Construction of the Nation. People’s Committees, or smaller cells of the organization, began to sprout all over Korea with the aims of preparing for a Korea

governed by Koreans for the first time in decades. The Americans in the South refused to recognize the Preparation Committee, dissolved the People’s Committees, and banned political dissent in a manner reminiscent of Japanese imperialism. General Hodge asserted to the Korean people, “The Military Government Office is the sole government of Korea. If there is any person who complains of the orders or deliberately slanders the Military Government, he shall suffer punishment.” The American occupation forces not only banned Koreans from contributing any input on their governance, but also retained Japanese officials and collaborators, keeping Japanese laws intact. These moves met with severe unpopularity, and resulted in many clashes between the indigenous population and U.S. forces.

Meanwhile in the North, the Soviets were accepting and encouraging of the People’s Committees. In an announcement nearly the polar opposite to that of General Hodge, Soviet Colonel-General Ivan Mikhailovich Chistiakov declared to the Koreans, “You obtained freedom and independence, and now your fate depends only on yourselves.” As more People’s Committees emerged, branches of the Korean Communist Party’s precursor began developing as well.

The Soviet occupation was not without its share of faults. Soviet troops notably engaged in sporadic acts of rape and pillaging, and in food requisitioning. However, the main difference is that the U.S. imposed direct military rule, while the Soviets allowed for much greater political independence. Geoff Simons notes that, “this important distinction signals the greater accord that the Soviets had with the bulk of the North

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Korean people, despite all the tensions and dislocations in the post-war period.”\textsuperscript{41} The importance of the two occupations is subtle. First, they provided what would become Communist North Korea with a sense of ideational legitimacy over what they saw as a puppet-government in the South. Second, the American intolerance for Korean input, and general disregard for the desires of the Korean people, became key components of future North Korean anti-American propaganda.

\textit{II. The DPRK of Today}

Kim Il-sung employed all means at his disposal to ensure the continuation and sustainment of his dictatorship, but he first came to power quite organically, perhaps even with a genuine ideological vision. He was well acquainted with the Soviet leadership and he was popular amongst the North Koreans. Kim had been heavily engaged in guerilla warfare against the Japanese, so much so that the Japanese had assembled a special military squad to eliminate him.\textsuperscript{42} Then, in 1941, after the Japanese had begun intensifying their assaults on the guerilla fighters, he was forced to flee to Siberia, where he began making connections with Soviet leaders. Thus, when the time came for the Soviets to elect a leader for the fledging nation, a long-time communist Korean who had already established ties with the Soviets was the ideal candidate; Kim Il-sung was the clear choice.

\textsuperscript{41} Geoff L. Simons, \textit{Korea: The Search for Sovereignty} (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995), 165.
\textsuperscript{42} Simons, \textit{Korea: The Search for Sovereignty}, 169.
In 1946, various communist-leaning parties in the North merged to form the North Korean Workers’ Party (NKWP), of which Kim Il-sung became leader. He asserted that one of the primary goals of the party was to liberate the South from the oppression of the Americans to once and for all render Korea free, independent, and unified. The NKWP, like the Bolsheviks in Russia, launched a campaign to recruit massive numbers of new members and created subsidiary units, such as the Labor Union, the Farmers’ League, and the Democratic Women’s League. The party even held elections of approved candidates. Though not truly democratic in reality, these elections added to the sense of legitimacy for the new government in the North.

There was a prominent belief amongst the North Korean leadership that the South was ripe for revolt against the Americans. While the North had been establishing its governmental system since 1946, Syngman Rhee did not come to power until two years later. It was believed that the South’s weak political system and insufficient human and physical capital would be unable to withstand an offensive launched for reunification. On June 25, 1950, the Korean People’s Army marched across the DMZ, commencing the Korean War, with the aim of evicting the U.S. from the South and reunifying the entire Korean peninsula under the North.

The U.S. decided to throw its weight behind South Korea’s forces, and pressed for the UN Security Council to send troops under its flag. China decided to enter the war as well, and Chinese-North Korean forces pushed the South Korean-U.S.-UN forces back behind the 38th parallel. The Korean Armistice Agreement was signed in 1953, leaving the Korean War technically without conclusion.

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What may be most significant about the Korean War for the North is the devastation it bore. Extensive and practically incessant U.S. air raids, and rampant use of bacteriological-chemical warfare, not only demolished half of the North’s industries, but also wiped out such a significant portion of the civilian population. From the perspective of the North Koreans, this was not a proxy conflict of the Cold War, this was a civil war intended to free the South of its new imperialist intruders, the Americans. Nationalism justified their assault. However, their attempt to unify their nation was shut down, and resulted in the most brutal effects of warfare inflicted upon DPRK citizens. From here on out, Americans would forever be demonized in the North Korean psyche, a point on which the regime would learn to capitalize. North Korean propaganda has relentlessly inculcated the message that at any moment the U.S. would once again try to destroy the North. The regime exploits this constant insecurity, using it as justification for prioritizing the military over civilians. North Korean children are taught that North Koreans were innocents targeted by the wrath of the U.S., and the collective memory of the destruction of the Korean War helps to support this notion.

After the war, the North Korean regime resumed its task of political development, characterized by the consolidation of Kim’s power. The NKWP was initially composed of four main factions, each representing various backgrounds. Soon, all political opposition had been eliminated, and Kim was free to continue building his cult of personality. By the early 1970’s, the party had been undeniably transformed into “an instrument of personal rule by its leader,” explains author Young Whan Kihl. “The iron
rule of Kim Il Sung reached the point of surpassing any other examples of totalitarian regimes in modern times.”

Kim’s cult began to form in a manner similar to that of Stalin, though it grew to become uniquely North Korean. In order to disseminate propaganda to the masses, the masses first needed to be able to consume it. This necessitated literacy campaigns and the mass expansion of public education, a result of which is that the DPRK currently claims one of the highest rates of literacy in the world. Furthermore, the substance of education began to change. In the initial effort to reinforce Korean nationalism, Korean history and language became the mandatory subjects taught in schools, rather than Soviet history and Russian language. The curricula continued to morph along with the development of Kim’s personality cult. By the late 1950’s, Korean history in textbooks was commonly rearranged, highlighting Kim Il-sung and ideological content. Literature containing anything that could be remotely considered anti-Kim or anti-regime was eradicated. Kim Il-sung was to be firmly established as the sole hero of the nation, the commander to whose heroism and selflessness the country was indebted.

More importantly, Kim Il-sung became positioned as a man of infallible wisdom. This has resulted in a system in which the decisions of the party, despite their obviously negative and even disastrous outcomes, cannot be questioned. Even when state decisions began to run the economy into the ground, no advisors would risk disagreeing with the ‘Great Leader’. The punishment for any dissidence can entail banishment to harsh labor ‘re-education’ camps, or death, not only for the individual at fault but also for his or her entire family. This has served to powerfully deter dissension.

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North Korean society has been segmented into a very strict caste system, similar to that of ancient Korea. The only difference is that a citizen’s place in society is determined by his relationship to the Kims. The utmost elite consists of family and friends of the Kims, as well as party members. The lowest of the low are those who have acted against the state, or are simply descendents of Japanese-collaborators or defectors.

The personality cult of Kim Il-sung was been redrafted to include his son, Kim Jong-il, and essentially the entire Kim family. This has enabled the North Korean dictatorship to continue on as a dynasty. Reverence of the Kims has replaced all religion, and infiltrated all facets of culture. Kim’s ideological creation, Juche, became a tool to enforce all state decisions, explain and avoid blame for failures, and maintain legitimacy and control.

II. The Impact of North Korean Ideology

In 1965, Kim Il-sung gave a speech entitled, “On Socialist Construction and the South Korean Revolution in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea,” in which he presented the three primary tenets of a brand new state ideology, called Juche. These tenets are: political independence, self-sufficient economics, and self-reliant national defense. The term Juche was used originally in the mid-1930’s by Kim Il-sung to vehemently attack Japanese imperialism and to articulate the need for a new path of nationalism. However, it was and has been resuscitated again and again as a device to justify state action and to encourage popular compliance.45

45 Kihl, Politics and Policies in Divided Korea, 20.
To give the impression that the government is omnipresent, Juche infiltrates every aspect of North Korean life. It is meant to be the guiding principle of every societal function, from holidays to education to the economy. Sadly, because it is a tool for the retention of power, and not a set of scientifically evolved methods for running a country, the use of Juche has resulted in disastrous failures of the North Korean state. Even worse, because it is to be seen as infallible, the DPRK is essentially bound to its use. Slight adjustments have been made here and there, but a drastic transformation to a more workable system is unthinkable. It is believed that many citizens are aware of the flaws in the party line. They have witnessed a decade of mass starvation in the 1990’s that were due to the regime’s policies. However, as long as the state holds tirelessly to its principles, the people are forced to continue adhering to them.

The prior anti-Japanese sentiment was transformed into anti-Americanism as a means of mobilizing passionate nationalism. The U.S. was whole-heartedly blamed as responsible for the division of the country, a subject of much bitterness and resentment for the Korean people. In a speech given in 1956, Kim Il-sung stated, “The division of our country is the reason for pain and unhappiness, both for the South Korean people under control of American imperialism…and the entire Korean population.” Children’s textbooks are chock-full of allegories of American brutality against innocent Koreans, or heroically depict anti-American resistance. In fact, anti-Americanism has been etched into nearly every facet of North Korean life, which has proven highly advantageous to the

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regime, for it has been able to, “effectively utilize the collective memory for propaganda. This has led North Koreans to unite in extreme hatred of their national enemy.”

The nationalist sentiment evoked by the anti-Japanese struggle was not only a tool for Kim’s ascension to power, but also a tactic to be recalled in times of ideological weakness. The 1990’s have presented, by far, the most demanding challenge to the regime. The ineffective distribution of resources and the loss of economic aid from fallen socialist allies resulted in an economic quagmire. The 1990’s witnessed a food crisis that amounted to one of the worst famines of the 20th century. According to Amnesty International’s estimates in 2004, the famine resulted in the deaths of over 3 million North Koreans. Thus the regime was presented with a severe challenge to its legitimacy. How was the leader supposed to claim infallibility when he clearly could not protect his people from famine?

Jae Jean Suh explains, “one of the tactics North Korea has been employing to cover up its systemic problems is the tactic of ‘shifting blames’ on to others or to the outside world.” The regime essentially manipulated the famine to create a sense of victimhood amongst the people, which was then used to justify a shift in ideology to the so-called ‘Military-first politics.’

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48 Ibid, 129.
49 Jae Jean Suh, The Impact of Personality Cult in North Korea (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 2004), 9.
allocation of resources to the army, a tactic used to, “put greater emphasis on self-defense and sovereignty to unite and mobilize the hungry masses,”51 in the mid-1990’s.

The regime has long been casting the blame for the DPRK’s troubles onto American imperialism. North Korean media and education frequently recall the atrocities committed by the U.S. during the Korean War, and create the sense that American attack is imminent. The regime has impressed upon its people that they are key players in a battle of good vs. evil. Every issue of the national newspaper features a section detailing human rights abuse in the U.S. and in South Korea.52 State propagandists manipulate even American aid to further reinforce the party line. The regime often asserts that aid and assistance from Western countries are nothing but attempts to infiltrate and overthrow the state, in order to take advantage of the civilians.

The North Korean economy has been in decline ever since its early days. DPRK specialists Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig explain that its economy suffers from several major problems, such as the lack of a market pricing mechanism. Another problem is that socialist ideology pales in comparison to profit incentives as an effective motivator for workers. There is also the military’s monumental drain on the economy. All resources must trickle through the military to reach the people, which grease the palms of those who would repress a revolt, in case one should ever arise. Even the DPRK’s agricultural system is heavily flawed. The country constantly suffers from electricity shortages, which prevent effective irrigation of its crops, as well as the outdated technology that result from ‘self-sufficiency.’ This can be justified to the citizens by reinforcing the notion that the country is on constant security alert because of aggressors such as the U.S. Therefore,

51 Jiyoung Song, "The Right to Survival,” 93.
52 Ibid, 102.
the regime is free to continue diverting resources to the military, and continue enjoying its monopolization of power without attempting the dramatic reform that would actually fix its problems.

III. Conclusion

DPRK-U.S. relations have never been favorable. Beginning with the partition, the backing and political repression of the South, and heavy involvement in the Korean War, subsequent anti-Americanism developed in the North quite naturally. However, the regime also realized that anti-Americanism could be a very useful political tool, and has frequently revived the tension. In 1968 North Koreans seized the U.S. reconnaissance ship, the *Pueblo*, on grounds of trespassing, and released the hostage crew only after a formal apology from the U.S. The next year North Koreans shot down a Navy reconnaissance plane, resulting in forty-seven American casualties. Then again in 1976, North Koreans violently slaughtered two U.S. officers for trimming a tree in the DMZ. By the time North Korea finally reached a stage in the development of its nuclear program that it caught the attention of U.S. intelligence, it possessed the means of continuing the ongoing tension indefinitely.

What the historical context of the DPRK should clarify is that the Kim regime has vigilantly pursued the survival of its regime, at all costs, since it first gained power. In order to do this, it has decided to remain isolated and ostracized. This allows it to remain closed off from outside information that reveals its system is broken. This also allows it to blame its inadequacies on foreign enemies. It becomes clear that the U.S. is presented
with an incredibly difficult situation. The North Korean regime has formulated a system that is essentially built upon lies about foreign powers and about its own motives. Thus the nature of its system has increasingly intensified the consequences of reform. Therefore, this system cannot allow for conceding to the U.S., the very foundation of the regime depends upon countering the U.S.

As long as South Korea, with all its success, remains in such stark contrast to the North, any opening whatsoever would expose the regime’s inadequacy to its people. The regime must continue to espouse its goal of reunification under the North, even if its leaders do secretly acknowledge this to be impossible. It must continue to assert its ideological superiority, as well as its military superiority. And what would enforce the military might and diplomatic sway of such a tiny struggling state better than the possession of nuclear weapons?
Chapter Three: A History of Failure

No state can be certain about the intentions of other states, which is why predicting an adversary’s resolve is so difficult. In the case of North Korea, predicting resolve and intention has been even more problematic given its extremely closed-off and isolated nature. Consequently, there has been a great deal of debate amongst American policy-makers and analysts over the nature of North Korean motivation, and the appropriate response. As this chapter details, this debate has had an active, and often detrimental, role in shaping U.S. policies towards North Korea. From Reagan’s term in office up until the current Obama administration, there has endured a perception that attributes the regime’s behavior to its security concerns. Thus, on various occasions U.S. policy has been influenced by the desire to appease such concerns, so that the regime might conclude that nuclear weapons are not necessary to its survival. This was a plausible assumption, given that the regime frequently cited the “hostile policy” of the U.S. as rationalization for its belligerency.

However, in this chapter I argue that the regime’s actions speak much louder than its words. In examining the course of this relationship over the past three decades, a noticeable pattern emerges that seems to characterize each and every North Korean nuclear crisis. This pattern suggests an overarching North Korean strategy that has remained consistent since the U.S. first discovered its nuclear ambition.
I. Reagan and George H.W. Bush

Though it was not until the Clinton administration that a nuclear crisis actually emerged, the North Korea’s nuclear past begins much earlier. Three years after the conclusion of the Korean War, North Korea signed two accords with Moscow for Soviet support in the development of a nuclear research program, and similar deals with China followed in 1959.53 By 1965 the North had received a Soviet-donated nuclear reactor, which it installed at a site in the province of Yongbyon, about 56 miles north of Pyongyang. However, North Korea’s nuclear interest did not arouse any suspicion until a couple decades later.

In the 1980’s, satellite photography revealed what appeared to be the construction of a second nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, in addition to the older one from the Soviets. U.S. intelligence could not decipher from the photographs whether this new reactor was intended for civil use or for weapons production, so they simply continued to monitor the construction. Mid-decade, Pyongyang reached out to Moscow seeking light-water nuclear power reactors with which to upgrade its civil nuclear program, in order to address persistent power shortages. U.S. officials jumped at the occasion and persuaded the Soviet Union to supply the light-water reactors on the condition that the North sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which it did in 1985.54

54 Don Oberdorfer, The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 254.
It seemed an effective means of uncovering the truth behind the new site. However, the North’s signing of the NPT did not serve to quell any suspicion. Under Treaty protocol, the North was allowed 18 months to reach an agreement on safeguards and inspections with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the organization responsible for enforcing the NPT. Unfortunately, due to a logistical error the wrong form was sent, and another 18 months were granted to account for the mistake. Yet when the final deadline arrived, still no action was taken. By 1989 it became apparent that the new site under construction was definitively a plutonium reprocessing plant, i.e. the sort of facility used to convert nuclear waste into weapons-grade material.\(^{55}\) Not only that, but it was enormous, the second largest in the world behind only one plant in the U.S. Its sheer size led some officials to suspect that North Korea possessed other, smaller, reprocessing plants, which it would have used as test facilities before starting a construction process of such magnitude. This all contributed to the realization that not only did North Korea have nuclear weapons ambitions, but these ambitions were already well underway.

In 1988 President Reagan implemented his “modest initiative” towards North Korea. The “modest initiative” encouraged diplomatic exchange and was intended to “create a new incentive structure, give Pyongyang a stake in cooperative behavior, and bring it into the mainstream of the region.”\(^{56}\) At this point, U.S. policy reveals the prevailing assumption that the regime’s motivation for developing nuclear weapons was

\(^{55}\) Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb*, 44.

defensive in nature, responding to legitimate insecurity. Reagan’s modest initiative sought to ease the regime’s security concerns in order to quell its desire to proliferate.

The subsequent H.W. Bush administration adopted the drive to ensure that North Korea would sign the safeguard inspection agreement with the IAEA. North Korea refused to comply on the basis that it felt threatened by the U.S. nuclear umbrella over South Korea, and North Korean diplomats asserted that they would comply only when the U.S. withdrew its nuclear presence from the peninsula. Accordingly, an interagency committee was assembled and produced the first comprehensive strategy to address the North Korea issue. The strategy was comprised of four main components, including both stick and carrot. The carrots included 1) the assurance that the U.S. nuclear presence had been withdrawn from Korea, 2) the decision that the U.S. and South Korea suspend their annual military Team Spirit exercises, and 3) that the U.S. grant North Korea one session of high-level government contact. The final component, the stick, was the reaffirmation of the U.S.-South Korea security alliance. This strategy was pretty exemplary of coercive diplomacy; it combined the threat of force with positive inducements. At first, it appeared to be successful.

By 1991 North Korea had received assurances that the U.S. nuclear umbrella had been withdrawn, which appeared to amount to progress. North Korea signed two notable accords with South Korea: an Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation, as well as a Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. The next year, after the announcement was made that the Team Spirit exercises were canceled, the U.S. fulfilled its promise to hold a high-level contact

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57 Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb*, 57.
meeting. However, the meeting transpired into less a negotiation between equals, and more as an opportunity for the U.S. to reiterate its stance; it was expressed that such meetings would continue in the future if the North cooperated. North Korea signed the safeguard agreement with the IAEA in January of 1992, and IAEA director Hans Blix flew out to visit the site at Yongbyon in May to establish contact with the North Korean officials and begin preparing for official inspections.59

It was during Blix’s visit that the North Koreans presented him with a vial of reprocessed plutonium, which contradicted their earlier claims regarding how much reprocessing they had conducted. After Blix’s visit, the IAEA moved in to conduct its first official inspections. With the use of highly sophisticated testing procedures it uncovered evidence that plutonium had been reprocessed on at least three separate occasions, not just once in 1990 as the North Koreans had previously reported. Furthermore, the sample presented during Blix’s visit did not match up with the samples gleaned from the official inspections, alluding to ‘missing’ plutonium, though the precise amount was unknowable.60 As suspicion and unease grew in the minds of U.S. officials, North Korea’s relations with the U.S., South Korea, and the IAEA began to deteriorate.

The North-South nuclear accords appeared to have failed in achieving much progress in terms of nuclear transparency and bilateral inspections. In response, South Korea called for a renewal of the Team Spirit exercises, a move that the North described publicly as “a criminal act” intended to derail North-South dialogue.61 Meanwhile the IAEA was requesting special inspections of two sites believed to be hiding plutonium

60 Ibid, 270.
61 Ibid, 273.
waste intended for reprocessing, which if true, would provide the proof that the North was reprocessing enough plutonium for weapons production. North Korea refused to allow the special inspections, claiming that the two sites in question were simple military warehouses and therefore did not fall under the jurisdiction of the IAEA. In February of 1993, the IAEA for the first time in its history demanded to investigate areas not offered for inspection by the host country, setting a deadline of one month.\textsuperscript{62} North Korea continued to refuse the special inspections on account of the threat posed by the reinstated Team Spirit Exercises. Blix continued to reaffirm the demand of the IAEA.

Many analysts held the first Bush administration accountable for allowing relations prior to the first nuclear crisis to sour. Arguments like that of Leon Sigal’s blame the U.S.’s ‘crime-and-punishment’ tactics, for “putting pressure on Pyongyang to allow nuclear inspections and holding out talks as reward for compliance with its demands.”\textsuperscript{63} Others blame the IAEA for being too severe with the North Koreans, motivated to by its preceding failure to adequately assess Iraq’s nuclear program. The IAEA insisted on exposing North Korea’s past nuclear efforts rather than focusing only on future prevention, a decision seen as antagonistic towards the North. Overall, the most common critique of the H.W. Bush administration is that it did not sufficiently engage North Korea- that it relied too heavily on indirect contact and offered too few incentives upfront. This is the lesson that would guide the subsequent Clinton administration.

\textsuperscript{62} Mazarr, \textit{North Korea and the Bomb}, 98.
II. Clinton

Shortly after Clinton took office in 1993, the UN Security Council voted to back the IAEA’s demand for special inspections, for which only China and Pakistan abstained. In response, North Korea became the first country in the history of the NPT to announce its intentions to withdraw. The withdrawal would come into effect after ninety days, effectively setting a deadline for the U.S. and the rest of the world to convince the North to reverse its decision. The U.S. responded to the North’s announcement with threats of global economic trade sanctions. North Korea declared that sanctions, if imposed, would be viewed as an act of war.

The U.S. arranged a high-level meeting, sending assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs, Robert Gallucci, to conduct negotiations. These negotiations appeared to deescalate the situation as the North agreed to temporarily suspend its decision, although no conclusion was reached regarding any of the inspections-related issues. Then in 1994, North Korea announced that, due to the special status evoked by its suspended withdrawal, it would move ahead with the removal of spent fuel rods from their reactor at Yongbyon, absent any IAEA officials. This announcement served as the catalyst that sparked the first nuclear crisis, and ultimately led to the very real possibility of war.

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Presence and involvement in the defueling process would have allowed IAEA officials to determine once and for all North Korea’s past production of plutonium. Without supervising the process, the IAEA would be unable to verify what would become of the plutonium that could be extracted from the fuel rods. It was estimated that there could be enough for the creation of at least four nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{67} In essence, the North’s decision to conduct the defueling process without any IAEA monitoring “represented a tangible and physical threat that the DPRK could move ahead to manufacture nuclear weapons.”\textsuperscript{68} It marked the moment during Clinton’s term when U.S. officials concluded that ‘preventative’ diplomacy had failed, and decided instead to turn to coercive diplomacy.\textsuperscript{69} Operations Plan 50-27 was fleshed out in early 1994: the first U.S. military war plan aimed at North Korea since the Korean War. The Clinton administration concurrently began to prepare a comprehensive plan for sanctions. Given the North’s assertion that sanctions would be perceived as an act of war, the drive to enforce sanctions necessitated simultaneously preparing for a very real chance of military conflict.

As the situation deteriorated and the prospect of war appeared to be an impending possibility, former president Jimmy Carter intervened, unexpectedly and drastically altering the course of events. Because high-level contact was reserved as a reward for good behavior, U.S. officials had dismissed the option of actually meeting with Kim Il-sung as a means of deescalating the crisis. Carter took extreme opposition to this strategy, and without authorization flew to Pyongyang to meet with Kim Il-sung himself as the

\textsuperscript{67} Oberdorfer, \textit{The Two Koreas}, 308.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid, 316.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
highest-ranking American official to ever actually travel to North Korea. After meeting with Carter, Kim Il-sung agreed to temporarily suspend North Korea’s nuclear program and allow two remaining IAEA inspectors to stay in the country. Carter assured the North Korean leader that there was no nuclear umbrella over the South, and that he would encourage U.S. support in acquiring light-water reactors for the North. He then publicly announced in a CNN interview that he saw the decision to pursue economic sanctions as a tremendous and irreversible mistake.70

The actions of former president Carter directly contradicted the policies of the Clinton administration, and cast a shadow of doubt over its ability to conduct effective foreign policy. However, the U.S. did suspend its pursuit of sanctions, agreeing to first arrange another round of high-level contact. The negotiations were interrupted by the death of Kim Il-sung but resumed a few months later, reaching a resolution under what was called the Agreed Framework. The agreement contended that the U.S. would form an international consortium responsible for supplying the North with light-water reactors, and the IAEA would be present for all refueling. The U.S. assured North Korea that it would not use nuclear force against it, and the North declared that it would remain in the NPT and agree to safeguard inspections.71

III. George W. Bush

The new Bush administration took an about-face in its North Korea policy, or “an ‘ABC’ policy orientation,” meaning, “‘anything but Clinton’.” A blatant indication of the change in posturing was the espousal of hostile rhetoric. Officials in the Bush administration publicly denounced the North Korean regime on multiple occasions, often depicting its leader as irrational and crazy. Then there was Bush’s notorious inclusion of North Korea as one of the “axis of evil,” along with Iraq and Iran, in his State of the Union address in 2002. But the change had begun earlier.

The deputy secretary of state, Richard L. Armitage, who had served under H. W. Bush, drafted a critique of the Agreed Framework and the approach of the Clinton administration in general, in what came to be known as the Armitage Report. The subsequent Perry Report, written by secretary of state William Perry, was based on Armitage’s findings; both reports illuminated the conservative objections with Clinton’s policies. Mainly this involved the concern that the Agreed Framework was guiding the U.S. towards blatant appeasement. Under the Framework, North Korea was allowed generous deadlines to comply, and would not have to accede to IAEA safeguards entirely until a significant portion of its light water reactor project was set in place. Few believed that any of these concessions would actually result in the dismantlement of the North’s nuclear program.

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73 Hwang, “Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy Toward North Korea,” 15.
75 Ibid.
Furthermore, new issues had arisen, and a strategy that focused solely on the nuclear program soon appeared inadequate. By the end of Clinton’s term in office, the North Korea problem had expanded to include a ballistic missile program, a uranium enrichment program, illicit trade in arms, narcotics, and fake currency, human rights abuses, and disconcerting relations with other rogue regimes. Therefore a departure from Clinton’s approach was in part caused by the broader range of issues to be dealt with. The Center for a New American Security working paper frames the policy debate that emerged under the Bush administration at this time as one between ‘regionalist’ and ‘globalist’ approaches. The regionalist camp, comprised of regional experts and Korea scholars, advocated that the goal should be to address North Korea’s security concerns. The globalist camp argued that North Korea was an element of the larger global problem of proliferation. They regarded the North as “just one of many ‘rogue regimes’ that were unlikely to change, and thus U.S. objectives could best be met by preventing proliferation and promoting regime change.”

Indeed several conservative officials felt that the North Korean regime was nearing collapse. By the mid-1990’s North Korea was suffering from a debilitating nation-wide famine and a decaying economy. A commonly held notion was that engagement was merely serving to prop up a tyrannical and failing regime. An increasing number of officials began to voice the sentiment that “the U.S. should begin to take a tougher stance that would at a minimum force North Korea back to the table on U.S.


76 Ibid, 5.
77 Ibid, 24.
78 Ibid, 25.
terms, or more preferably, allow the North Korean regime to proceed more quickly toward a ‘hard landing’ collapse.”

This internal opposition began to obstruct the U.S.’s ability to make good on its promises to the North. As a part of the Agreed Framework, the Clinton administration had promised deliveries of heavy fuel oil, but had been too optimistic about the contributions of allies and requested an overly modest amount of funding from Congress. Finally deciding to ask a mostly conservative Congress for more money for concessions, and getting Congress to actually agree, ended up delaying the whole process. The result was that by 1997, U.S. obligations still had not been met. Additionally, South Korea and Japan refused to provide funding for the light-water reactors promised in the agreement, causing delays in yet another commitment to North Korea.

In 1998, North Korea resumed its provocative behavior and displayed advances in its missile technology by launching the Taepodong rocket over Japan. Additionally there was mounting evidence that indicated that North Korea was developing a Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program, which it first denied but later admitted. North Korean representatives insisted that they were entitled to invest in uranium enrichment due to the threat posed by Bush’s “hostile policies,” and set forth a list of preconditions to be met before they would consider negotiating, such as a security assurance from the U.S.

Given this shocking discovery, Washington sets its focus on achieving Complete, Verifiable, and Irreversible Dismantlement (CVID) of the North’s nuclear program. This

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approach called for a ‘comprehensive agreement’ with Pyongyang that would address not only North Korea’s plutonium reprocessing, but also the HEU program, as well as any and all nuclear weapons already in its possession.\footnote{Jonas Schneider, \textit{The Change Toward Cooperation in the George W. Bush Administration’s Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy Toward North Korea}, 2010 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010), 47.}

In 2002, the Executive Board of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), the organization set up to implement the Agreed Framework, convened and decided to cease heavy fuel oil shipments to the North. The North was informed that resumption of these shipments was dependent on it abandoning its HEU program. North Korea responded by declaring that the Agreed Framework was annulled, recommenced construction on new nuclear reactors, expelled the IAEA inspectors, and publicized its intention to reprocess plutonium from the spent fuel rods. Then North Korea once again announced that it would be withdrawing from the NPT and IAEA safeguards agreement. It finally did so in April 2003, becoming the only country to have ever left the Treaty.\footnote{Berry, “North Korean Nuclear Weapons Program,” 14.}

The Bush administration faced a novel situation. The North Korean threat had metastasized to include a whole new host of issues in addition to plutonium reprocessing. The 9/11 attacks also had an impact on U.S. policy, as it served to dramatically heighten concerns regarding the proliferation of nuclear weapons amongst non-state actors, and many feared a North Korean regime that would be supportive of terrorism. Thus the scene was set for the shift towards approaches described as ‘hawk engagement’ and ‘tailored containment.’\footnote{Ford, Hosford, and Zubrow, “U.S.-DPRK Nuclear Negotiations,” 23-4.} Hawk engagement “is based on the idea that engagement lays
the groundwork for punitive action.”

In other words, it is based on the notion that engagement could be used to test the North’s resolve to cooperate, and thereby uncover its true intentions. Then, should the North behave uncooperatively, there would already be a foundation set to take punitive measures. Tailored containment was a strategy that “included isolation and containment to minimize the DPRK’s military threat, maritime interdiction to prevent the proliferation threat, and a strong sanctions regime to cut off Pyongyang’s access to illicit funds.”

In sum, there remained a heavy emphasis on the need for engagement. However, a much higher value was placed on using sticks, or negative coercion, to supplement diplomacy. The idea behind the use of engagement under the Bush administration was no longer about assuaging the North’s security concerns, but instead was a tactic designed in response to distrust and fading optimism.

Even Democrats began to join the Conservatives in seeking a new, tougher stance with North Korea. Reports written on both sides of the U.S. political spectrum began calling for a more comprehensive approach; one that would include “time limits on negotiations to avoid North Korean stall tactics, phased step-by-step agreements, and clear verification protocols and benchmarks.”

There was also an accepted notion that the bilateral approach attempted under Clinton had been proven ineffective, and instead the Bush administration became more inclined towards multilateralism. The U.S. joined the Six-Party Talks throughout 2003 and 2004 which involved China, both Koreas, Japan, the U.S., and Russia, though they did not amount to any considerable progress.

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87 Ibid, 27.
fact, North Korea publicly claimed to already possess nuclear weapons that it might soon begin testing.

At a fourth round of the Six-Party Talks the U.S. proposed a deal: North Korea would completely abandon its nuclear program, and in return, the remaining five parties would provide security assurances, assist the North in its pursuit of energy sources, and begin discussions on terminating economic sanctions.\(^8^8\) North Korea declared that it would freeze operations at its reprocessing plant in exchange for heavy fuel oil and energy assistance. The negotiations reached an impasse and were postponed until 2005, when finally, an agreement was concluded in what came to be known as the Joint Statement. The Statement stipulated that the North would abandon its nuclear weapons program, return to the NPT, and allow inspections, but deadlines were left unspecified. North Korea also reserved the right to continue its civil nuclear program, and thereby continue possession of light-water reactors. The U.S. provided security assurances and promises of energy assistance. Even though there was dispute amongst the five parties over the issue of North Korea keeping the light-water reactors, such specifics were tabled to be determined at a later date.

The hope inspired by the Joint Statement was soon shattered when North Korea ran its first nuclear weapons test in October 2006. The other five parties negotiated an ‘action plan’ the following year to implement the terms of the Joint Statement, but were met with further North Korean opposition to stricter verification.\(^8^9\) Then, the Bush

\(^{88}\) “Ending the North Korean Nuclear Crisis,” (The Center for International Policy and The Center for East Asian Studies, University of Chicago, November 2004, 9-10), Selig S. Harrison, Chairman, as found in Berry, “North Korean Nuclear Program,” 16.

\(^{89}\) Ford, Hosford, and Zubrow, 29.
administration unexpectedly seemed to undergo a reversal of its new hard-line policy, and shifted back towards the path of diplomacy.

The U.S. decided to offer a series of incentives in exchange for various steps taken in the direction of denuclearization. In another session of Six-Party Talks on February 13, the U.S. also expressed a desire to pursue a “normalization of political relations with Pyongyang, a replacement of the Korean War armistice with a peace treaty, and the building of a regional peace structure for Northeast Asia.” North Korea agreed to destroy its cooling tower at Yongbyon (used in the process of extracting plutonium from spent fuel rods), though this did not ensure they would not be able to restart the reactor. In return, North Korea received substantial aid, and Bush agreed to remove North Korea from the U.S.’s list of state sponsors of terrorism.

IV. Obama

The Bush administration was harshly criticized for its initial hostility towards the North Korean regime. Many analysts still adhered to the belief that the regime’s nuclear aspirations were driven by the pursuit of security in response to legitimate fears of American aggression. Such an assessment would indicate the potential for engagement, and the offering of increased, more relevant, and better-elucidated inducements. This optimism is precisely what prompted President Obama to campaign and enter office on the promise of such a strategy. In a response to the widespread tendency to blame North Korean actions on a lack of U.S. diplomacy, Obama took a new and unprecedented

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91 Ford, Hosford, and Zubrow, 29.
approach. Upon entering office, he appointed special envoy Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, who soon took off for Pyongyang to engage in high-level contact with North Korean officials. The President asserted to the members of the Six-Party Talks that the U.S. was ready and willing to participate in multilateral negotiations. The Obama administration also repeatedly stressed to the regime the U.S.’s commitment to follow through with all of its promises under the 2005 Joint Statement.

These moves were expected to create some goodwill between the two adversaries. Instead, North Korea responded by announcing a satellite launch in February 2009, and then conducted a ballistic missile test in April, its second nuclear test in May, and more missile tests in July. The regime also permanently withdrew from the Six-Party Talks, asking instead to commence four or three-party talks on building a “peace regime.”

Then, in 2010, North Korea incited another provocation by sinking the ROK naval vessel, the Cheonan, killing 46 people. The U.S. once again shifted back towards more coercive measures, announcing to the North that it would be conducting naval exercises off the coast of the Korean peninsula. The U.S. also further tightened sanctions against the regime.

North Korea responded aggressively, shelling Yeonpyeong Island in November, killing four South Koreans. That same month, North Koreans also made the shocking revelation to visiting American scientist, Siegfried Hecker, that they had already furtively built a new uranium enrichment facility.

The next year, Kim Jong-il died, and was succeeded one year later by his son, Kim Jong-un. Any hopes of reform that had been aroused by the power succession were

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soon put to rest when the new leader oversaw the successful launching of a North Korean satellite into orbit. The very next month, January 2013, after receiving unanimous condemnation from the UN Security Council, North Korea carried out its third nuclear test.

V. The Pattern of U.S.-DPRK Relations

U.S. policy towards North Korea has undeniably differed from administration to administration for the past three decades, but it has not abandoned the strategy of coercive diplomacy. While the specific combination of carrot and stick has not always been consistent, the combination has always persisted in some form since the George H. W. Bush administration. For this reason, the experiences of these past administrations can, in fact, be characterized by their overall consistency. Damon Coletta refers to it as a, “steady oscillation,” or, “a persistent pendulum swing between harsher measures intended to break Pyongyang and economic or security concessions to assuage the regime.”

However, these policies, or policy shifts, were largely ad hoc responses to a pattern of North Korean behavior. Each crisis seems to begin and end in a very similar manner. First, covert and undesirable North Korean actions come to light, either unintentionally, e.g. discovering the second nuclear reactor at Yongbyon by satellite photography, or intentionally, e.g. North Korean presenting Blix with a vial of reprocessed plutonium. Then, the U.S. is forced to respond, which it has chosen to do

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with either coercion or inducement or a combination of both. The situation escalates; oftentimes the North provides a catalyst by withdrawing from the NPT, or from the Six-Party Talks. Then finally, either the international community or North Korea suggests a return to negotiations, at which point the regime bargains cooperative steps towards negotiation or denuclearization in return for food aid, technological assistance, or bilateral contact. Then the whole process repeats all over again.

 Apparently, whether or not the U.S.’s approach swings towards the side of coercion or towards engagement, the end result is the same. Robert Art and Patrick Cronin explain:

> Crises are ways to measure the relative strength of wills; consequently, mistakes are easy to make in situations where resolve is hard to estimate. In such situations, the coercer too often underestimates the target’s will to resist because, more often than not, the target cares more about the matter at issue than the coercer.  

This description accurately describes every North Korean provocation. It is evident that the U.S. has consistently underestimated the regime’s resolve to remain a nuclear power, and thus, each crisis ends with the North’s nuclear program intact. The regime continues to espouse its desire to normalize relations with the U.S. and the world, as well as its willingness to consider dismantlement. However, its actions seem to reveal a drastically different indication of their true intentions.

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Chapter Four: Determining Mission Impossible

The debate over how to deal with North Korea has channeled Washington’s decision making throughout the past five presidential administrations. Doves and hawks agree that North Korea’s nuclear program poses a threat to regional and national security. However, at the heart of the debate is a disparity not only between how each side proposes to respond, and more importantly, how each side assesses North Korea’s actions. Are they defensive in nature, or are they inherently expansionist? Particularly vexing is the high level of ambiguity surrounding the regime’s intentions and motivations, leaving much open to interpretation. While doves and hawks agree on the events, they usually reach opposite and irreconcilable conclusions. A working paper published by the Center for a New American Security notes that, “this internal dissention has produced a policy paralysis that has at various times tied the hands of U.S. negotiators, frustrated allies and partners, and completely derailed the design of a unified U.S. strategy.”

The basic question of how to assess the threat posed by North Korea can be illustrated by the difference between offensive and defensive realism. Both strands of realism agree that states operate under the constraints inherent in the anarchic international system, but they disagree on their effects. Offensive realism, originally theorized by John J. Mearsheimer, dictates, “because only power can guarantee states’ survival, all states are assumed to seek to maximize their power relative to other states.”

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Thus, an insecure state will view expansionism as necessary to survival. It will be driven to conflict with other states and will seek to maximize its relative power at any given opportunity, regardless of the existence of an actual threat or lack thereof. It will seek to alter the status quo, because it is the very status quo that is deemed threatening to its existence. States are aggressive in order to survive and view domination as the only way to quell an existential threat.

On the opposing side, defensive realists believe that states seek to preserve the status quo, and are driven to conflict only out of fear of a specific threat, not the desire to assert dominance. They view acts of hostility and aggression as responses to concern over a state’s security. The state may behave as expansionist, but only because it feels it has been cornered. Due to the security dilemma, wherein even a defensive move by one state may be perceived as offensive by another, “even if states normally pursue security-seeking strategies, they unintentionally may appear to be pursuing revisionist strategies.”97 Thus defensive realists may accept that a state displays expansionist behavior, but suggest either that misperception is at play, or that the motivation is security seeking and not dominance seeking.

The difference between these two sides holds profound relevance in the case of North Korea. Is North Korea inherently expansionist and seeking to alter the status quo? Or is it responding to what it perceives as a specific security threat? Which one of these scenarios is accurate dramatically alters the appropriate course of action. If North Korea is responding to what it perceives as threats to its security, posed by either the U.S. or South Korea, then an obvious solution is to assuage those security concerns.

97 Hwang, “Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy Toward North Korea,” 18.
In this scenario, North Korea has sought to obtain a nuclear arsenal because it felt this was the only way it could secure existential safety. Therefore, it is conceivable that blunders in U.S. policy implementation, or overtly hostile rhetoric, could have been driving factors in North Korea’s intransigence. The U.S. would be advised to recognize what impact its actions and statements have on the regime, and it must take responsibility for clarifying its non-aggressive intentions. This would call for a more accommodationist policy; one that would be focused on addressing the North’s security concerns, offers incentives, and relies on diplomacy.

In stark contrast, an offensive realist perspective would suggest the North is not responding to a perceived threat, or at least not entirely. Rather, the regime is set on possessing a nuclear arsenal, because this is the key to overpowering or matching its adversaries, namely the U.S. and South Korea. Therefore, its decision to proliferate is unaffected by U.S. incentives or security assurances, and in fact, such actions would be counterproductive. In offering incentives, the U.S. appears susceptible to manipulation and extortion. Furthermore hawks believe that accommodation “may even increase the demands of the target state if it is driven by a sense of strategic opportunity.”

This final chapter addresses the U.S.’s policy errors that have been so commonly blamed for its failure. It also lays out how this argument is faulty, providing evidence that implies the opposite conclusion: that the North determined to become a nuclear power even before the U.S. began responding to crises.

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I. Implementation Failure

The very first on George and Simons’ list of necessary conditions for successful coercive diplomacy is ‘clarity of objective,’ which has been a recurring problem in the U.S.’s DPRK policy. Coercive diplomacy towards North Korea was first consciously put into practice under George H.W. Bush, and immediately incited debates over what objective to prioritize. The first query was whether to focus on nonproliferation or disarmament, i.e. whether to focus on capping the North’s nuclear program, and preventing the spread of fissile material, technology, and information, or whether to focus on dismantling and destroying what North Korea already possessed. The former goal required that North Korea rejoin the NPT, sign safeguards, and verify its past nuclear endeavors. While this would work towards nonproliferation efforts, signing the NPT, which did not actually forbid plutonium reprocessing, could not guarantee the latter goal of disarmament. Caught between these two goals, the Bush administration tried to appease each side of the debate, which only seemed to further obscure the realization of tangible progress.

Through indirect diplomacy via the IAEA and South Korea, the U.S. lost considerable control over its policy. The IAEA clearly prioritized the goal of nonproliferation and grew adamant about uncovering the regime’s past activity, insisting on the inspections of questionable sites that had not been explored. At the same time, the U.S. encouraged inter-Korean dialogue on disarmament, which resulted in the Joint Declaration on Denuclearization. However, after the U.S. had already agreed to a high-level contact session and the suspension of the Team Spirit exercise, South Korean
President Kim Young Sam insisted that these terms be held as rewards for North Korea sending an envoy to engage in serious talks with the South. The U.S.’s prior promises had been hijacked and brought into the folds of South Korean and IAEA agendas. This morphed U.S. strategy into the crime-and-punishment approach, i.e. holding out for inspections and using high-level talks as rewards, thereby limiting any potential of bilateral negotiation.

The Clinton administration decided to focus on denuclearization, but at the same time, North Korea became involved in other disconcerting activities. Now the challenge to defining a clear objective adopted the question of whether to focus solely on the nuclear program, or to address a broader range of issues. Under George W. Bush, the objective became increasingly muddied as Conservatives brought the option of hastening a ‘hard-landing’ regime collapse into the equation. This bogged down U.S. policy in a whole new way, posing questions such as whether the U.S. should engage at all if the regime was heading towards collapse. Discord over the envisioned future of the regime ended up hindering the implementation of the Agreed Framework.

In the end, U.S. strategy was encumbered by the fact that its objective has not remained consistent, but has varied depending on third parties, domestic politics, and the expanded range of North Korea’s illicit activities. Without a clear objective the U.S. allowed room in the negotiation process that favored North Korea. Each new issue granted the regime the opportunity to break up the steps towards certain objectives into numerous, separate bargaining chips. Allowing third parties to influence American objectives loosened U.S. control of its own strategy, which has casted doubt over its reliability, and thereby weakened its diplomatic power.
Referring back to George and Simons’ list, another deficit of U.S. strategy relates to the condition of international support. Multilateral coercive diplomacy is even more innately difficult to realize than unilateral; it is constricted by the pull of multiple agendas, goals, and approaches. For example, U.S. attempts to impose sanctions on North Korea have frequently faced the opposition of China and Russia. China, in particular, has always staunchly opposed any action that could possibly induce a regime collapse, for fear that refugees will flood its border. South Korea, too, has not always aligned its goals with those of the U.S., exemplified by the South’s decision to resume the Team Spirit exercises despite the U.S.’ promise to suspend them. In another example, after the North Koreans sank the Cheonan, the U.S. policy response was once again tied to the South Korean reaction. Although the U.S. was willing to leave open a channel for dialogue and multilateral diplomacy, the Lee Myung-Bak administration insisted that the Six-Party talks be held as reward to an apology for the provocation from the North.

Another condition on George and Simon’s list is ‘precise terms of settlement,’ something frequently absent from U.S North Korea policy. This is due to shifting objectives, the struggle to balance the objectives of allies, as well as the discord in domestic politics. As a nation with highly divided domestic politics, particular tasks have been derailed by internal dissonance, as in the case of devising and implementing the Agreed Framework. Jimmy Carter’s interventionist mission caused an abrupt about-face in Clinton’s policy, forcing the administration to abandon its campaign for sanctioning and isolating the regime. Though the Clinton administration had initially sought a guaranteed dismantlement, the shift to an engagement strategy entailed purposefully
adding some ambiguity into the terms of the Agreement, in order to focus on nonproliferation rather than disarmament.

The result of this was an agreement whose implementation was notoriously tricky. It failed to set definite deadlines for North Korean compliance with the safeguards, and required so much aid from the U.S. that Conservatives in Congress actively attempted to block what they saw as appeasement. North Korea seized the opportunity to blame later provocations on distrust caused by unfulfilled promises of the Agreed Framework, and was able to continue in its weapons advancement given the breathing room provided by hazy terms of settlement.

These deficits, and subsequent consequences, all relate to weaknesses in the implementation of U.S strategy. However, to focus on only issues with the pursuit of the goal implies that absent such errors, the strategy could have worked. It implies that perhaps if the U.S. had stuck to one objective, clarified the terms of settlement, and relied solely on unilateral diplomacy, the goal itself was feasibly attainable. Yet this is not the full story. Undeniable shortfalls of coercive diplomacy towards North Korea involve the failure to achieve escalation dominance and the failure to target the regime’s pressure points. These problems are not failings in strategy implementation. These failings indicate the inapplicability of coercive diplomacy altogether.

**II. Facing A Brick Wall**

Escalation dominance increases pressure on the target while denying it the opportunity to adapt or counterescalate, and pressure points are the vital areas that are
also weak spots. The North Korean regime has proven itself remarkably adept at protecting itself on both fronts. When the U.S. has imposed trade sanctions, North Korea has rearranged its trade relations, relying more on China, or on other willing partners who share the same goals or values. To supplement its inadequate legal economy, North Korea has turned to illicit activities, such as the sale of narcotics or dealings in counterfeit U.S. currency. In one notable instance, the U.S. did manage to target a weak spot of the regime through implementing financial sanctions. However, although this action appeared to have some effect, the regime responded with counterescalation, and the U.S. was forced to back down.

How the regime has prevented American escalation dominance has to do with the fact that North Korea is not, in fact, as isolated as it is often portrayed to be. In 2006, following North Korea’s nuclear test, the UN passed Resolutions 1695 and 1718. The first banned all member states of the UN from engaging in transactions that involved the transfer of material, technology, or financial resources connected in any way to the regime’s weapons programs. The latter resolution unanimously imposed sanctions on North Korea, entailing an embargo on military and technological material and luxury goods, and a freeze on North Korea’s financial assets. However, these resolutions did not deal North Korean trade relations the blow they were intended to; they merely altered them. Japan instated a complete embargo, and trade with European nations stagnated, but the regime adapted.

A study published by the Peterson Institute for International Economics, which compiled data from the Korean Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), illuminates the geographic shift in North Korea’s
trade relations. Between 2004 and 2007, the North’s trade with Middle Eastern nations
grew at the twice the rate of its trade elsewhere, despite the fact that Middle Eastern
countries widely known to be involved in North Korean arms dealings, such as Iran,
Syria, and Yemen, do not report trading at all. North Korea’s bilateral trade with China
has also grown steadily since the second nuclear crisis. As the study reports, “North
Korea’s 2006 nuclear test and the imposition of UN Security Council sanctions had no
perceptible effect on North Korea’s trade with China.”

In addition to rearranging its trade relations, North Korea has been engaged in
illicit activities for decades in order to hamper the effects of coercion. These activities
include narcotics trade and counterfeiting currency, as well as international missile sales.
The regime’s dealings in illegal drug production and trafficking have been ongoing since
the 1970’s, and spiked in the 1990’s to compensate for the near collapse of its legal
economy. Furthermore, North Korea has been earning profit, while simultaneously taking
a jab at the U.S., by counterfeiting U.S. $100 bills. Estimates by the U.S. Congressional
Research Service pegged the profit reaped from counterfeit bills alone to be at least $15
million in 1999. The regime also gave Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld reason
to call North Korea the “single biggest proliferator of ballistic missiles:” In 2001 alone, it

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99 Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, “Sanctioning North Korea: The Political
Economy of Denuclearization and Proliferation,” (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute
100 Ibid, 15.
brought in $560 million from missile sales.\textsuperscript{102} If nothing else, these actions demonstrate how the regime has circumvented the effect of sanctions used for coercion.

There is one case in which the U.S. appeared to have finally, successfully, struck a pressure point of the North Korean regime; then it backfired. After investigating some of the North’s illicit activities, in 2005 the Treasury Department identified Banco Delta Asia (BDA) in Macao as a “primary money laundering concern” under the Patriot Act.\textsuperscript{103} Besides publicizing the bank’s misconduct, the Treasury Department asserted that after thirty days the U.S. could bar BDA from the U.S. financial system entirely. Simply identifying the bank as a concern had a powerful effect. Banks across Asia promptly scaled back or ceased business with BDA, or with North Korea altogether. The mere announcement of a potential regulatory measure, which would only directly apply to business with U.S. institutions, was enough to set off a chain reaction in banks around the world, of disassociating from BDA and from North Korea.

This amounted to the freeze of $25 million of North Korean holdings by Macanese authorities, of which, after much difficulty, the regime finally managed to transfer to a small bank in Russia. The BDA identification was a simple, unilateral measure, and it resulted in a significant movement that isolated North Korea financially. Few banks wanted to jeopardize their own access to the U.S. and international financial systems. Thus, by harnessing the commercial interests of financial institutions, the U.S. diminished the need to convince foreign governments to align with its objectives via policy.

\textsuperscript{102} Balbina Y. Hwang, "Curtailing North Korea's Illicit Activities," \textit{The Heritage Foundation} (2003):
Many analysts have pointed to the BDA incident to demonstrate the efficacy of financial sanctions on North Korea. They conclude that because the U.S. was able to impose some hurt on the regime, at very little cost to the U.S., such measures are a sound policy option to consider in the future. However, the story does not end with the $25 million in frozen assets. The regime responded with counterescalation, and the ultimate effect can hardly be considered a success.

First, North Korean officials used frozen accounts to justify their refusal to return to the Six-Party talks, and set the return of the frozen funds as a precondition for continuing discussions on disarmament. Then, in 2006, North Korea launched several ballistic missiles in July, and its first underground nuclear test in October. This counterescalatory measure proved quite effective for North Korea. In 2007, the U.S. agreed to return the frozen funds, although given the difficulty in finding institutions willing to handle dirty money, the negotiating process was delayed another four months. North Korea finally returned to the Six-Party Talks, and agreed to implement a denuclearization plan, only to withdraw from the Talks once again, restart its nuclear program, and test a second nuclear device in 2009.

In the end, the U.S. inflicted some financial pain on the regime, the regime counterescalated, and ultimately the U.S. was forced to bend. This is a prime example of one of the many ways in which coercion can backfire on the coercer, particularly in the case of a rogue regime. The BDA episode exemplifies what Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman describe as scenario “where an adversary’s most sensitive pressure point is also the point which, if pressed, could provoke the most dramatic and dangerous response.”

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104 Byman and Waxman, *Dynamics of Coercion*, 224.
The failure to achieve escalation dominance and exploit pressure points is essentially due to the nature of the regime itself. The omnipotent state control and the state ideology have significantly undermined U.S. efforts at coercion. Nearly all of the coercive mechanisms mentioned by Byman and Waxman, including threatening a regime’s relationship with its core supporters, creating popular dissatisfaction with a regime, weakening, and denial, cannot be applied to North Korea.\(^{105}\) The regime’s ties to its core supporters, the military and party elites, are unshakeable. Years of pursuing a military-first policy have cemented this, as well as routine political purges to ensure the loyalty to the leader in the upper echelons of North Korean society. Even the strain of financial pressure could not sever these ties. To induce any instability is to doom the entire system, and therefore the North Korean elite understands that the only means of preserving their power is to preserve the power of the leader. This is a large effect of the Kim personality cult; it has served to maintain the relevancy of the Kim leader himself.

As for popular dissatisfaction, considering what the country has been through, especially during the 1990’s, it is hard to imagine how the U.S. could possibly create a worse internal situation than the regime has on its own merit. And for the time being, rebellion or insurrection is out of the question. Omnipresent state control, that liberally employs severe punishment for minor transgressions, has successfully prevented any counter movements, even during a time when millions of people were left to starve. Furthermore, the regime exploits U.S. ‘hostility’ to its own gain. It justifies its unequal distribution of resources, the priority given to the military, the militarization of society, etc., by emphasizing the imminence of a U.S. attack. It blames the U.S. for any and all

\(^{105}\) Byman and Waxman, *Dynamics of Coercion*, 50.
problems of daily life, even when U.S. policies do not discernibly impact the North Korean living situation. So it is unlikely that the U.S. could turn the people against their regime, anti-Americanism is too deeply indoctrinated in North Korean society.

As long as North Korea enjoys relations with its other allies, denial will not work, and neither would an attempt to debilitate the country as a whole. North Korea is already debilitated; it has little to lose except, of course, its nuclear program. It should also be noted that the nuclear program itself is presented to the people as an indicator of North Korea’s prestige and significance on the world stage. It serves to maintain control internally, as well as manipulate foreign entities for gain.

Thus, the regime has been able to defy U.S. attempts at coercive diplomacy. It has circumvented trade sanctions by relying increasingly on China and its other allies. It has resorted to illicit activities to help compensate for its deficient economy, thereby allowing the regime to survive absent any substantial reform. And even when the U.S. took action that did impose some hurt, the regime successfully regained control of the U.S.-DPRK dynamic by counterescalating. Finally, the regime has proven time and again its willingness to let its people suffer. All resources filter first through the military and the elite before reaching the populace, and therefore sanctions frequently have the effect of hurting the citizenry more than anything else. Absent the ability to inflict any political stress on the regime, no U.S. action has been able to coerce North Korea to any long-term, enduring effect.
II. Assessing Motivation

Analysts are now reaching very different conclusions about the nature of the regime’s motivation, including what Dr. Andrew Scobell asserts is, “a very real possibility that North Korea’s key strategic goals are to build up its WMD programs, engage in parasitic extortionism, and pursue unification by force or coercion.”\textsuperscript{106} Driving this sort of allegation are new analyses on the regime’s true strategic interests. North Korea expert, Victor Cha, suggests that all of the regime’s actions that can be seen as ‘provocations’ may actually be genuine attempts to improve its nuclear weapon and ballistic missile programs. Each test has exhibited technological advancement from the last. The incessant, and decades old, drive for progress could imply a desire to actually \textit{posses} formidable capabilities, not just brag of or threaten them for attention.

A regime-apologist argument is that developing their weapons plan is an undesired but necessary option for the regime, given a lack of better inducements. In response, Cha references two prior instances in which food, energy, or better relations were offered to the regime. The 1994 Agreed Framework offered U.S.-donated heavy fuel oil, economic and energy assistance, and a roadmap for bettering bilateral relations. The 2005 Joint Statement provided similar, even expanded, offerings. On both occasions, the regime rejected these offers. In 2009 the regime began refusing U.S. food aid altogether.

However, the regime seems to have been discreetly seeking something other than aid for survival. During the Bush years, North Korean officials continued to affirm that

\textsuperscript{106} Andrew Scobell, “North Korea’s Strategic Intentions,” (Strategic Studies Institute, 2005): vi-vii.
shutting down their reactor at Yongbyon depended on the delivery of the promised light water reactors for their civilian nuclear program. Yet Cha cites several instances during negotiations with Ambassador Christopher Hill when the North Koreans would suggest that the U.S. should simply accept North Korea’s nuclear status as it had for India and Pakistan. The U.S.’s deal with India included an accepted nuclear status, a civilian nuclear energy component, and even allowed for a portion of nuclear reactors to remain outside of required inspection. “The North’s incessant rejection of the talks as one-sided denuclearization,” Cha argues, “their continuing references to their de facto nuclear weapons status, and their demand that they be treated like India and Pakistan offer insights into their goals.”

Cha also highlights a rather significant counterargument to the claim that North Korea operates purely out of insecurity and fear of a U.S. attack. The U.S. has, in fact, explicated over and over again that it does not aim to attack the regime. In 2005 the U.S. negotiating team delivered a comprehensive statement, in writing, presented in front of international witnesses at the Six-Party Talks, declaring, “The United States affirmed that it has no nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula and has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons.” This statement expanded on a similarly voiced sentiment issued under Clinton. However these assurances had no discernable effect on the regime’s decision-making whatsoever. Cha concludes that the prevalence of contradiction, between what the regime demands and what satisfies it, indicates a dedication to the pursuit of goals outside the influence of U.S. policy.

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108 Ibid, 126.
III. Conclusion

So where does this leave us? Facing a nuclear-equipped regime that is impervious to coercion and indifferent to inducements. The pattern of the U.S.-DPRK dynamic is undeniable. Through brinkmanship tactics and provocation, North Korea creates a crisis. The regime sets demands for returning to the Six-Party Talks, negotiations proceed in detail, all while foreign governments and NGOs send aid, and all while the regime continues advancing its nuclear and missile programs. Then, sooner or later the whole process begins again. The regime has received security assurances, food aid, multilateral negotiations, bilateral negotiations, and the promise of normalized relations, and still no inducement to date has resulted in any lasting progress. The regime’s remarkable resiliency, given its disregard for the wellbeing of its people, its allies outside of U.S. or UN authority, and its counterescalatory strategies, has rendered it almost entirely immune to any coercive effort by the U.S.

Regarding the objective of denuclearizing North Korea, the U.S. is in a bind because the North Korean regime itself is in a bind. Its survival depends on its very rogue nature, and on its nuclear status. Fundamental change would undoubtedly threaten the regime’s position. It cannot open up, because to allow information from the outside world to enter the country would enlighten its citizens to the extent of their repression. It would reveal to the North Koreans the success of the South Korean system, and the utter failure of their own. This would contradict everything the party works to impress upon its people, such as the infallibility of Juche and of the Kim family, and the heroism of the
regime in the face of hostility from the Western world. Any fundamental reform would
equate the undoing of the regime’s grip on power, and without any fundamental reform,
the economy remains at almost a standstill. With such a weak economy, the regime must
ensure that it continues to receive aid, and it would like to demand it, not beg for it. Thus
the North Korean regime depends on being a nuclear state. WMD are the very lifeblood
of the regime. Stephen Bradner affirms:

[T]he regime in Pyongyang is locked on a course which it cannot deviate
without serious risk of fracture…the North’s enormous internal contradictions and
the anomic forces they may unleash mean that any policy, no matter how well
thought out and how carefully crafted, will have only a very limited ability to
influence Pyongyang or to provide us with a measure of control over events.\(^{109}\)

Therefore, it is reasonable to label the North Korean regime as inherently
offensive. It will never be safe in a status quo in which South Korea lies directly across
its border. Pyongyang views South Korea’s very existence as an existential threat. So
while U.S. coercive diplomacy towards North Korea did indeed suffer from imperfect
implementation, incoherency, and uncontrollable difficulties in maintaining multilateral
support, all these causes of failure pale in significance against the truth about the
regime’s motivation. It cannot be compelled to denuclearize, and the poor track record of
this pursuit provides the evidence.

This conclusion leaves the U.S. with very few options, and a rather grim outlook
on the ‘solvability’ of the North Korea problem. Given that, for now, the U.S. is not
going to use military force to topple the regime, I believe the U.S. should abandon the
objective of denuclearization, and focus on non-proliferation. The U.S. should hold

\(^{109}\) Bradner, “North Korea’s Strategy,” 72.
positive security assurances, i.e. promises of active assistance in the regime’s survival, as rewards for improving the internal condition of human rights in North Korea.

The U.S. should also continue to use deterrence to ensure regional stability. Given the regime’s awareness that harming American troops would incur military repercussions, stationing U.S. forces in South Korea has proven fairly effective in preventing major attacks from the North. Negotiations should continue, but aim to cap and monitor North Korea’s nuclear activities, and work towards ensuring that the regime does not aid proliferation for other rogue regimes and non-state actors.
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