Policy Forum 00-02A: Clinton and North Korea: Past, Present, and Future

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Clinton and North Korea: Past, Present and Future

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I. Introduction

The following article, "Clinton and North Korea: Past, Present and Future," by Joel Wit, is the first of a series of articles on attempts to engage the DPRK by the international community. Mr. Wit, a Guest Scholar at the Brookings Institution in Washington, is a former US State Department official who worked on North Korea issues from 1993-1999. This article will be a chapter in a forthcoming book entitled "Solving the North Korean Nuclear Puzzle" by the Institute for Science and International Studies.

Wit reviews the history of US President Bill Clinton's engagement policy of the DPRK. He argues that the Agreed Framework has been successful in preventing the DPRK from developing a nuclear weapons arsenal, but has not been fully implemented across the board. At present, the Perry Report has restored some stability to US-DPRK relations. Further progress in the near future could make it difficult for the next US administration to make drastic changes in policy, although a Republican president is likely to take a somewhat different approach toward the DPRK.

II. Essay by Joel Wit

Five years ago, the U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework was signed, ending the confrontation between the two countries over North Korea's nuclear weapons program and setting them on a path of engagement. Given the previous four decades of hostility, that path has proven to be difficult. Most recently, the growing threat posed by the North's development of long-range missiles seems to have been halted by an agreement reached between the United States and the North providing for a temporary moratorium on long-range missile tests. The United States, in turn, has agreed to lift the Trading with the Enemy Act, economic sanctions that have been in place since 1950. In addition, the U.S. is expecting the first-ever visit of a senior North Korean official to Washington in early 2000. Given the recent flurry of events and the approaching end of the Clinton Administration, it is a good time to assess the past five years, to look at where that relationship stands now and to think about where it may be heading in the future.

1. The Past

When evaluated objectively, the 1994 Agreed Framework still appears to have been a good deal for the United States. First and foremost, the agreement dealt with what was almost certainly the imminent threat of an active, substantial North Korean nuclear weapons program that could have begun production of such weapons within a few years and resulted in a large stockpile by the end of

the century. Critics of the agreement seem to forget that the D PRK might already have produced enough plutonium for up to two weapons and had sufficient plutonium in irradiated fuel to build up to five additional weapons. Add to that the plutonium likely to come from two new reactors under construction and, by the end of the century, the North stockpile might have grown at a rate of 10-12 weapons per year. In short, North Korea could have become an overt nuclear power on par with Israel if not larger.

Such a development by itself would have been very disturbing. National Security Review 28, completed by the Bush Administration in spring 1991, summarized the reasons why a nuclear North Korea would have posed grave difficulties for the United States, Japan and South Korea. Nuclear weapons in the hands of the North could; 1) pose a direct threat to U.S. forces in the ROK, Japan and the surrounding seas; 2) be used to threaten the ROK and Japan; 3) lead the ROK to develop nuclear weapons on its own, potentially disrupting the U.S.-ROK security relationship, bilateral cooperation in nuclear energy and regional relationships; 4) significantly alter Japan's security perceptions, possibly to the detriment of regional stability and U.S.-Japan relations; 5) prompt the ROK to conduct a pre-emptive strike on DPRK nuclear facilities, which could engage U.S. forces and involve them in any DPRK counterattack; 6) be sold abroad; and 7) embolden the North to use its conventional military capability against the South. All of these concerns were just as valid three years later when the Agreed Framework was concluded.

Superimposing a nuclear North Korea on the internal political and economic situation that has developed in that country since 1994 would have created an even more frightening situation. Food shortages and large-scale starvation became widespread beginning in 1995. The economic downturn, which had begun well before the signing of the Agreed Framework, accelerated. The death of Kim Il-Sung in summer 1994 and the slow motion succession of Kim Jong-Il created the perception that the North's political stability was hanging by a thread. Perceptions that the North was about to collapse gained widespread acceptance, not just in the West. Following the death of Kim Il-Sung in July 1994, there was a definite perception in South Korea that the North would not last long. During the closing stages of negotiations which led to the Agreed Framework and the reactor supply contract in 1995, President Kim Young-Sam repeatedly urged the U.S. to bide its time since the North would collapse soon.

The agreement did have shortcomings. The U.S. publicly acknowledged that it did not deal with facilities other than those associated with the known core elements of the North's nuclear infrastructure. Limitations on research and development or provisions for "anywhere, anytime" inspections of suspect nuclear sites seemed to be unachievable at the time. The agreement did provide for an eventual extensive IAEA examination of the North's nuclear program, which would take care of these concerns. Nevertheless, these "shortcomings" are still the focus of criticism in the United States. For example, the recent Republican "North Korea Advisory Group" report to the Speaker of the House of Representatives states there is "significant evidence" that over the past five years" undeclared nuclear weapons development activity continued, including efforts to acquire uranium enrichment technologies and recent high-explosive tests." This assessment may be correct but the key question remains does the North have a covert program which has produced or is producing nuclear weapons.

On this issue, the jury is still out. While North Korean defectors are notoriously unreliable, many have talked about an active, covert program. On the other hand, Kim Kil-son, who worked for the official in charge of the North's munitions industry, has stated that the DPRK is maintaining the option of building nuclear weapons but probably has not produced them. The fact is that, contrary to the impression given by the Advisory Group report, there is no significant evidence of a parallel covert nuclear program on anything approaching the scale of the overt frozen program. The recent

experience with the suspected nuclear site at Kumchang-ni--which U.S. inspectors found to be nuclear-free in spite of intelligence reports leaked to the press--is a cautionary tale which critics should take into consideration when making claims about the North's nuclear program.

There has been significantly less progress in implementing the other sections of the framework. Contrary to the terms of the agreement, diplomatic liaison offices have not been established in each country, largely because the North, after a great deal of initial progress, has seemed uninterested. While the agreement specifies that further improvements in bilateral political and economic relations will occur as other "issues of concern" to the U.S. are addressed, there has also been little progress on this front until recently. (In this context, while the agreement is not specific, it was clearly emphasized to the North both during senior-level meetings leading to the Agreed Framework and throughout 1995 that the most important issue of concern to the United States was its ballistic missile program.) The one exception to this rather dismal picture has been U.S.-DPRK discussions on locating and returning the remains of American soldiers missing in action during the Korean War. For the most part, these discussions-because of their humanitarian nature-have been insulated from the broader ups and downs of the bilateral relationship.

The same is true for provisions in the Agreed Framework dealing with South-North relations which specify that the North should take steps to implement the South-North Denuclearization declaration and to reengage the South in bilateral dialogue. The North has shown no interest in moving forward with negotiating the inspection regime necessary to implement the South-North accord. Indeed, all mention of the agreement seems to have dropped out of the diplomatic discourse with the North. On South-North dialogue, if the barometer of success is government-to-government contacts, then the record is abysmal. But if the barometer includes business and non-governmental activities, then the record is not so bad, particularly given the dramatic expansion of such contacts since the Kim Dae-Jung Administration took office in 1998. The fact remains that the North under Kim Jong-Il considers government-to-government contacts to be a political "third rail" although it has seemed quite willing for some time to reap whatever economic benefits it can get from the South.

The failures of the last five years have less to do with the Agreed Framework and more to do with poor implementation. It is worth noting that those problems do not just include the difficulties of moving forward with "other issues" and South-North dialogue. As is well known, they also cover key components of the Framework including: 1) the slow pace of getting the KEDO reactor project off the ground; 2) haphazard deliveries of heavy fuel oil to the North promised by the Agreed Framework and; 3) the lack of progress in preparing for the International Atomic Energy Agency's eventual examination of the North's nuclear past in an effort to determine once and for all whether the North has a weapons program.

Less well documented are the reasons for these problems. There has been speculation that the U.S. government has deliberately implemented the agreement slowly on the assumption that the DPRK would collapse soon. Immediately after the agreement was completed, press reports cited Administration sources who argued the U.S. would never have to follow through with its commitments. Those reports became more frequent in 1995-1996 as the North's situation worsened and U.S. officials predicted that Pyongyang might not last much longer. More recently, one key official has hinted publicly at a linkage between the North's weakness and U.S. policy. In 1997, shortly before taking office, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs Stanley Roth told a Senate committee: "from a Machiavellian perspective, buying time is in our national interest."

However, reality has little to do with the perception. The reality is that poor implementation over the past five years has less to do with some Machiavellian plot and more to do with other, more mundane problems.

* Lack of leadership by the Clinton Administration: As the nuclear crisis receded and senior-level decision-makers moved on to other business, implementation sank back into the bureaucracy. As a result, the Administration has had trouble sustaining momentum, particularly in the face of problems with Congress, the ROK and the North. But the U.S. also suffered from "mission creep" and had trouble keeping focused on implementation. In April 1996, the U.S. and ROK put a new major proposal for Four Party Peace Talks on the table. Unlike previous formulas for peace talks, which came and went with great frequency, this proposal became the overwhelming focus of U.S. policy to the detriment of implementation of the Agreed Framework and particularly efforts to stem the DPRK's missile program.

* Fear of Congress: Even before the Republicans won the 1994 legislative elections, the Administration was hesitant to commit significant resources to implementation given the controversy surrounding the Agreed Framework. The results of that election only made the Administration more cautious. While Congress has provided most of the funding that has been requested, those requests have fallen short of what was actually needed. A case in point: the Administration has not asked for even token funding for the KEDO reactor project since its first request was rejected in 1995. The Hill's refusal to provide even token amounts for the project--and the Administration's unwillingness to push for funding--has weakened the U.S. ability to lead in implementation of that project and in engaging the North.

* Difficulties in dealing with North Korea: Under the best of circumstances, the North is difficult to deal with and any expectations to the contrary were misplaced. The North has continued to pursue measures seen as necessary to insure its national security, measures that have resulted in incidents such as the 1996 submarine incursion into ROK territory. That incident had major political consequences, setting back implementation at a time when momentum was starting to build. Moreover, the North became increasingly distracted by its own internal economic problems, focusing on securing the next food shipment rather than on moving forward on its broader strategic agenda of engagement. Finally, a great deal of confusion was created in Pyongyang by the new Four Party proposal and the subsequent U.S. emphasis on that proposal, confusion that resulted in much wheel-spinning and delay.

* Difficulties in dealing with South Korea: In the aftermath of the Agreed Framework, the Kim Young-Sam Administration did everything possible to stymie U.S. initiatives to move forward, particularly in improving political and economic relations. This may have been a backlash against what was perceived by many in the ROK as an unjust agreement that stuck it with a large bill for two light-water reactors. Nevertheless, it was a bill the Kim Young Sam Administration insisted on paying in order to have a large say in the project. Having initially encouraged the U.S. to engage the North after it withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1993 and then pushed it to put forward a comprehensive settlement with the DPRK, including improved political and economic ties, by 1995 the Kim Administration's growing insecurity led it to oppose any engagement without an improvement in South-North ties.

As a result, by 1998 implementation continued slowly, but the U.S. effort resembled a fragmented process rather than a policy designed to achieve specific results.

2. The Present

During the past year, U.S.-North Korean relations and those between the North and the rest of the international community seem to have bottomed out. 1998 was a particularly bad year with the public disclosure of a suspected underground nuclear site in the North followed closely by the

August long-range missile test. For the moment, that trend has been reversed. The U.S. team which visited Kumchang-ri in May 1999 found no evidence that the site was being used to house a nuclear reactor, reprocessing plant or any other nuclear-related facility. Former Defense Secretary William Perry's review of U.S. policy and his visit to Pyongyang in spring 1999 helped prompt an agreement in Berlin on a temporary flight test moratorium for long-range North Korean missiles. The U.S. also announced that it would lift the Trading with the Enemy Act sanctions that had been in place since 1950. Moreover, as a result of the Berlin agreement and subsequent discussions, a senior-level DPRK official will visit Washington soon. Finally, Japanese-DPRK normalization talks have resumed, the result of a visit to Pyongyang by former Japanese Prime Minister Muriyama late last year.

In particular, the Perry review has played a critical role in reinvigorating the Clinton Administration's engagement policy.

* It has served as a valuable "mid-course correction." The review reaffirmed the main objectives in U.S. policy-makers minds at the time the Agreed Framework was signed; controlling the North's nuclear and missile programs in the context of improving political and economic relationships between the North and the United States, South Korea and Japan. That focus was lost once the U.S. shifted its emphasis to the Four Party Talks in April 1996.

* It reemphasized a theme that has been implicit in U.S. policy since the Bush Administration, namely, if the North did not move down the path of engagement, the other path in U.S.-North Korea relations could entail unspecified measures to bolster deterrence.

* The review restored trilateral cooperation between the U.S., the Republic of Korea and Japan which had been very close up until 1995 but then seemed to deteriorate, in part because the new focus on the Four Party talks left Japan out of the main arena of engagement.

* Finally, the review restored a high-level focus on North Korea policy that had been lacking since 1996 when Ambassador Robert L. Gallucci, the negotiator of the Agreed Framework, left the U.S. government. Because of that focus, the Perry review provided the Administration with the wherewithal to lifting economic sanctions as part of an effort to improve bilateral relations.

While the Perry process has not restored bipartisan support for the Administration's policy, no review could have achieved that objective in an election year short of a total change in policy. It is ironic that the string of positive events in 1999, set in motion in part by a review mandated by congressional critics, has taken the wind out of the Hill's sails. Nevertheless, the Clinton Administration's approach in dealing with "rogue states," including North Korea, Iraq and Iran, has already been the subject of attack by one Republican candidate, Senator John McCain.

As for Pyongyang, it has been cautiously receptive to the Perry process. There may be many reasons for that receptivity but, above all else, the North is motivated by regime survival. That objective may be served by maintaining the option to deploy long-range missiles and nuclear weapons. However, for now, it is not served by moving forward with testing or deployment. This is especially true given the North's continued economic and food problems which, in spite of recent improvements, still have to be a source of concern for its leadership. Maintaining engagement with the United States is still more attractive since it opens the gates for receiving economic benefits from South Korea, maybe Japan and certainly China which is loathe to see a return to an era of confrontation between the DPRK and the outside world. Moreover, the North can not totally ignore the potential security ramifications of its own actions. For example, the August 1998 missile test has helped accelerate trends in Japan towards a more assertive defense posture that the North must view with concern.

In that context, Pyongyang also has to have some concerns about a possible change in U.S.

Administrations come January 2001. Locking in progress during this Administration, such as the lifting of the Trading with the Enemy Act sanctions, and seeking some equilibrium in its relations with the ROK and Japan would seem to be a perfectly prudent approach in the face of uncertainty about the future.

3. The Near Future

Will the Perry Review give U.S. policy enough momentum to move forward this year? The visit to Washington of a senior-level DPRK official will certainly provide the Administration with an important opportunity. The Administration's objectives for such a visit are likely to be twofold. First, it would like to reinvigorate efforts to control the North's weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems. That probably means seeking more definitive language committing the North to a missile test moratorium, the resumption of talks on limiting the North's ballistic missile program and establishing another negotiation designed, in the words of the Perry report, to provide "verifiable assurances that North Korea is nuclear free." Second, the two sides are likely to establish a process designed to improve political and economic ties. It might address anything from further senior-level contacts, to increased food aid, to removing North Korea from Washington's list of countries that sponsor terrorism. The North is more interested in the latter set of discussions, which are also important from Washington's perspective since an improvement in overall relations is necessary to help make progress on issues that concern it the most.

However, the Administration's ability to move forward over the next year may be limited. Achieving progress on Washington's main agenda- limiting the North's missile and nuclear programs- will be difficult since the issues are technically and diplomatically complicated. On the other hand, achieving progress on some issues of concern to Pyongyang--such as improving political relations or securing increased food aid--might not be as complicated. But pushing forward without progress on both tracks could leave the Administration exposed to partisan attacks in a presidential election year. That reality will almost certainly inject a note of caution into the Clinton Administration's approach.

The North may also not be in a rush to move forward. Discussions on setting up the senior-level meeting have moved at a slower pace than anticipated, a pace that reflects Pyongyang's own unknowable internal priorities and dynamics. Many factors may come into play including inherent distrust, the lack of clear benefits for the North if it signs up to the Perry process and a decision-making process that has to accommodate some players who are less enthusiastic than others about engagement. The North's caution may also reflect a view that the political situation in the U.S. is not ripe for sustainable progress beyond the upcoming senior-level meeting. Indeed, some North Koreans may hope that a new Republican Administration could deliver such progress a la Nixon and China. In any case, if historical experience is any guide, the North is capable of moving forward quickly but usually only after a period, sometimes prolonged, of sparring. That dynamic will not work well with an Administration entering its last year in office.

Even if U.S.-DPRK relations make little near-term progress, the situation in the region could achieve some temporary equilibrium in 2000. An "October surprise" by the North--such as a missile test--can not be totally discounted but its policy now seems to be on a different course. The DPRK-Japan normalization talks, just underway, will be an important bell-weather. Continuing discussions will serve as an important brake on any further mischief. But if those talks were to break down, as they have in the past over the complicated issue of kidnapped Japanese nationals, that might signal tough times ahead. As for the South-North relationship, the continuing growth of economic and social ties is likely to exert some constraints on Pyongyang. Moreover, after clearing the hurdle of the

upcoming elections, President Kim Dae-Jung may exert every effort to secure government-t--government contacts. There is evidently some thinking in Pyongyang that after the election, Kim--like President No Tae-u before him--may be even more anxious to make progress as he approaches "lame duck" status. It is unclear how Pyongyang would respond but it will probably want to cautiously explore this possibility.

The thought of equilibrium may seem comforting. But, if there is one lesson to be learned from the past, it is that equilibrium on the peninsula may be hard to sustain, particularly in the face of the inevitable unexpected event. That may take the form of incursions like the 1996 submarine incident, the 1999 clashes in the Yellow Sea or something even more serious, like the death of Kim Il-Sung in 1994.

4. Beyond the Clinton Administration

While a victory by either Democrat is unlikely to result in any policy changes, a Republican Administration may be a different story. Based on past statements by key advisors, a Bush Administration is not likely to change the overall policy approach, although it may differ on tactics and some substance. For example, in a February 1995 Washington Post article, former Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, now a close Bush advisor, argued that the Agreed Framework's major flaw was its failure to achieve "a reduction in the North Korean threat to South Korea or significant progress in North-South relations." He stated that "special inspections must be accelerated" rather than waiting for the completion of a significant portion of the reactor project as specified in the Agreed Framework. Wolfowitz also argued that heavy fuel oil couldn't be provided indefinitely without "reducing the military threat, particularly the massive offensive development of North Korean forces." In 1999, Ambassador Richard Armitage, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense and also a Bush Advisor, led a "Team B" review of U.S. policy. The review supported engagement although it was critical of the substance and tactics of the Clinton Administration's approach. The Armitage report argues for strengthening deterrence to support a more activist U.S. diplomatic effort. That effort would include, among other measures, a six party conference (United States, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Russia and China) which would make it clear that all participants are prepared to coexist with the North. The review also argued that, while the U.S. should honor existing commitments such as the 1994 agreement, it should seek some modifications, particularly the early shipment of spent nuclear fuel out of the North.

A McCain Administration's policy may be even more different than the Clinton approach. Throughout 1994, Senator McCain asserted that any sanctions against the North should be backed by the explicit threat of air strikes against North Korea's nuclear reprocessing facilities. During President Carter's trip to Pyongyang in June 1994, Senator McCain stated that "we wait and wait and wait endlessly for the administration to recognize the manifest failures of its diplomacy and cease its mindless devotion to the principle if at first we fail to appease, try, try again." In 1998, after the North's long-range missile test, McCain argued that the U.S. should cut off all funding to KEDO. In 1999, after the U.S. and DPRK reached agreement on access to the suspected nuclear site at Kumchang-ri, Senator McCain stated "I fear that it may be the beginning of a pattern of material concessions by the U.S. in exchange for vaguely worded commitments that the North Koreans have no intention of keeping." In any case, a new Administration is likely to face significant constraints on its ability to change the current approach towards North Korea. One little noticed result of the Perry review is that, by restoring trilateral consensus on North Korea policy, it may tie the hands of the next Administration. While the U.S. government may change, there are unlikely to be any significant political changes in South Korea or Japan, both of whom played an active role in shaping the Perry approach. Moreover, maintaining trilateral consensus will be critical for Democrats as well as

Republicans, not just to ensure the proper backing for U.S. diplomatic efforts towards the North, but also in helping Washington to ensure that neither of its allies pursues a too independent approach. In short, Washington may have some leeway to change the current policy but not much without stressing its critical relationships with Seoul and Tokyo. If the new U.S. Administration decides to continue down the current path, it will face three key challenges.

* Implementation of the Agreed Framework: A new Administration may try to accelerate implementation of the Agreed Framework's nuclear provisions. But even without acceleration, it will have to prepare for the IAEA's examination of the North's nuclear past, the issue that provoked the original crisis in 1993. That examination, which could begin in 2004, is likely to be both politically and technically stressful for the U.S., its regional allies and the IAEA. It will touch upon core strategic interests for all concerned including the integrity of the Agreed Framework and the international non-proliferation regime, the future of U.S. relations with South Korea, North Korea and Japan, and the future security environment in Northeast Asia. A new Administration will have to carefully prepare prior to the beginning of the examination to ensure success, a difficult task since little or nothing has been done since 1994. While the nuclear freeze also preserved important information, there has been virtually no progress in preserving additional information essential to the conduct of the examination, a result of North Korea's stonewalling continual IAEA requests.

* Pursuit of limits on missiles: Whatever happens as a result of the senior-level DPRK official's visit to Washington, the North is unlikely to agree to a test moratorium of unlimited duration and may, at some point, threaten to restart its test program. While it is conceptually easy to devise a staged program of measures to control the North's missile program, the key issue will be whether a new Administration is willing to "buy out" the North's missile program. That concept remains politically incorrect, but the North is unlikely to give up a program it views as "legitimate" for nothing. The price remains unclear but Pyongyang has dropped hints in the past that the program may be up for grabs for cash from any country willing to pay or linked to a new "peace agreement" on the Peninsula. It will be interesting to see how far a new Republican Administration would be willing to go to stop the DPRK's missile program through diplomatic measures, particularly since ending that program would undercut arguments for a strong national missile defense program. All of this will have to be done in the context of a growing South Korean effort to build longer-range missiles and space launch vehicles, a development which will almost certainly complicate U.S. efforts.

* The future of the U.S. security policy on the peninsula: This may prove to be "a bridge to far" for any new Administration but it remains the critical issue in determining success or failure if the current U.S. approach continues. Can a policy of engagement be successful without adjustments in the U.S. security posture on the Peninsula? The answer is probably no because the changes the U.S. seeks in North Korea's security posture--its foregoing weapons of mass destruction, ballistic missiles and ultimately reductions in its conventional forces--are only possible if accompanied by changes in the U.S. posture on the peninsula. Moreover, recent rumblings from the South indicate strong public support for reducing the U.S. troop presence. All of these developments point towards the need for serious consideration of a transition away from the 1953 armistice agreement to a more permanent peace arrangement as well as away from current U.S. troops levels. A key question for a new Administration will be the ultimate objective of that transition and, on a broader level, its implications for U.S. relations with the Republic of Korea and the rest of the region.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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