



The United States Engages a Cold War Orphan

In June 1994, the administration of President Bill Clinton faced what many officials considered its most delicate and potentially explosive foreign-policy crisis yet. The United States had been negotiating with the North Korean government of Kim Il Sung for almost a year, intent on discovering whether the isolated Communist regime already had nuclear weapons, and on halting any efforts on its part to build atomic bombs.

The on-again, off-again negotiations had broken down in alarming fashion a month earlier. Thumbing its nose at U.S. negotiators and the international non-proliferation community, North Korea unloaded the core of its 5-megawatt (5-MW) nuclear reactor, removing enough plutonium-rich fuel rods to provide the raw material for as many as five nuclear bombs. "In many ways, Korea poses the greatest security threat to the United States and the world today," Defense Secretary William Perry declared after the unloading. "We have to regard the situation as very dangerous."

The provocative defuelling had other implications besides the obvious threat that North Korea could amass a small arsenal of nuclear bombs by year's end. If

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the hermitic state continued to flout international nuclear regulations, it could discredit U.S.-supported efforts to control the worldwide spread of atomic weapons. Moreover, if North Korea were known to have produced an atomic bomb, it might well spark a nuclear arms race in Asia. To make matters worse, many believed a nuclear North Korea would export weapons to other rogue nations like Iran and Libya.

Most chilling of all was the threat that the spiraling tensions surrounding the nuclear standoff could pull the United States into immediate war with an unpredictable, and perhaps desperate, adversary. Military leaders had already warned the president that if the North invaded America's South Korean ally, more than one million people could be killed, including as many as fifty thousand Americans. Military strategists believed that allied U.S. and South Korean troops would ultimately repel a North Korean attack, but the South's capital city of Seoul, just 25 miles south of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the two Koreas, would almost certainly be devastated. (For a map of the Korean Peninsula, see Figure 1.1.) "If North Korea attacked the South, they would lose," declared General Robert Riscassi, a former commander of U.S. forces in Korea. "The problem is: at what price?"²

The United States was determined not to let the nuclear dispute escalate. But finding a way to influence North Korea's behavior without worsening the conflict proved increasingly elusive. No common ground existed on which to base a new round of negotiations. China, one of North Korea's few remaining allies, appeared either unwilling or unable to broker a resolution. And a Clinton administration drive to pressure the North with the threat of United Nations economic sanctions seemed only to provoke Kim Il Sung, who declared repeatedly that sanctions would constitute an act of war.

Many viewed Kim's threat as bluster, but the administration could not afford to be unprepared. By mid-June, officials were making secret plans to send ten thousand more troops to South Korea and laying out the first steps the United States should take to prepare for war. In Seoul, skeptical South Koreans participated in air-raid drills and stocked up on food and emergency supplies. In the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, meanwhile, the rhetoric grew ever more bellicose. To most observers, a second Korean war still appeared unlikely. But for the U.S. officials who had managed the long, and now paralyzed, negotiations, the likelihood of resolving the dispute without military conflict appeared slimmer every day.

A HISTORY OF SUBJUGATION

The 1994 nuclear dispute occurred against a backdrop of centuries of regional hostilities. For most of its history, a unified Korea had struggled to repel invasions by its more powerful neighbors, in particular China and Japan. These

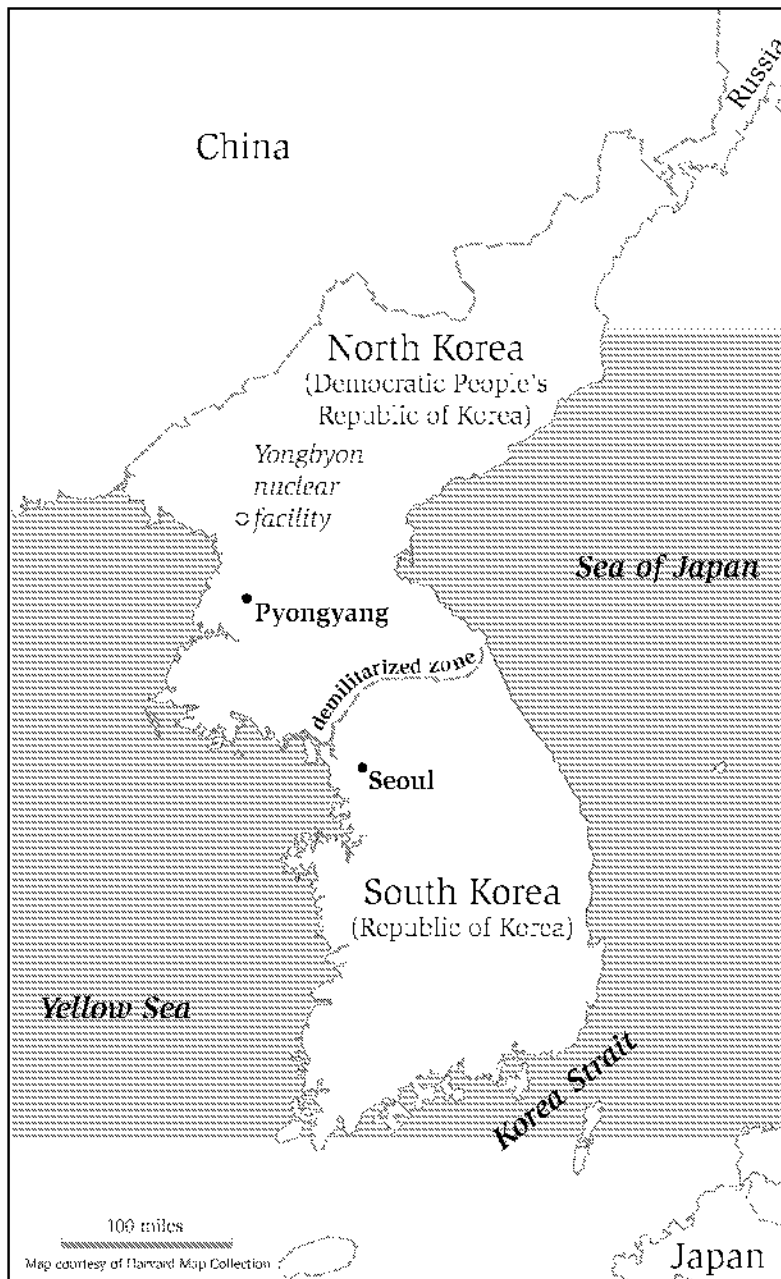


Figure 1.1. The Korean Peninsula.

recurring aggressions—including a repressive 35-year Japanese occupation that ended with Japan’s defeat in World War II—had left the Korean people with both a profound nationalism and a deep residual mistrust of outsiders.

Korea’s sense of being a pawn in an international game did not end with its liberation from Japan in 1945. Victorious Allied forces had agreed that Korea should revert to self-rule, but the small nation’s destiny continued to be defined by other nations’ interests and ambitions. The Soviet Union had invaded Korea in its final assault against Japan, and a hasty postwar deal allowed the Soviet Union to occupy the northern half of the Peninsula and the United States to occupy the South. An Allied trusteeship and a joint U.S.-Soviet commission were to help transfer power to a unified Korean provisional government, but growing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union soon blocked reunification. In 1948, the Republic of Korea (ROK) was formed in the South under right-wing leadership. One month later Kim Il Sung was installed as Premier of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the North.

**What key events
shaped each
side’s perceptions
of the other?**

Less than two years later Kim’s Communist regime invaded the South, launching the bloody Korean War.³ The Chinese-backed DPRK battled the ROK and a U.S.-led United Nations alliance up and down the length of the Peninsula; Seoul changed hands four times. Armistice talks began early in the conflict—after the Communist leaders concluded they could not rout the UN forces, and the UN Command decided it could not retake North Korea without a full-scale assault on China—but it took more than two years to negotiate a cease-fire.⁴ By the end of the war, more than one million people had been killed, including 250,000 civilians and more than fifty-four thousand Americans. Subsequent Western views of the Kim Il Sung regime were profoundly affected by Communist tactics, such as the North’s brainwashing of many prisoners of war. North Korea had established itself as a sinister and cunning adversary.

In the decades following the cease-fire, both Koreas seized on eventual reunification of the Peninsula as a rallying cry and a justification for extreme political behavior. In the South, rebuilding a nation with formidable economic and military strengths became a consuming goal, and only U.S. pressure discouraged the ROK from developing its own nuclear weapons. A series of authoritarian military leaders made frequent use of martial law and torture in the cause of eradicating Communism and resisting the North. Nevertheless the United States supported the South Korean government staunchly, helping to fuel a long-standing student-led protest movement that blamed the United States for the totalitarian regime.

Kim Il Sung, meanwhile, built his autocratic rule around an almost religious devotion to the concept of *juche*, or political and economic self-reliance. The

“Great Leader,” whose image loomed on statues dotted across the North Korean countryside, also masterminded terrorist activities aimed at undermining the South, including bombing a South Korean airliner, killing all 115 aboard, in an apparent attempt to disrupt the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Kim’s renegade status in the international community was solidified by the North’s export of missiles to other terrorist nations, and its pursuit of a nuclear program—to unclear ends.

The United States viewed Kim as the dangerous and unpredictable leader of one of the world’s most repressive and authoritarian regimes, and maintained a tough stance toward the DPRK. In addition to tens of thousands of troops, the United States had installed nuclear weapons in South Korea, a capability decried by the North as a flagrant threat.⁵ Annual U.S.-ROK war games, known as Team Spirit, served as a regular reminder to the North of the forces—including nuclear—aligned against it. The United States wanted to avoid military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, but its longstanding goal was the nonviolent overthrow or collapse of the government in the North and reunification of Korea under the rule of the ROK.

Almost four decades after the Korean War ended, hostilities continued to simmer. Even at the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, nearly one million troops still faced off on either side of the 150-mile-long DMZ, the most heavily armed border in the world. In fact, North Korea, the most militarized country anywhere, maintained the world’s fifth largest army. Since no peace treaty was ever signed, the two Koreas were still technically at war.

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION TAKES ON THE NORTH’S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

North Korea had had a nuclear program since the mid-1950s, and in 1980 it had begun building a small 5-MW reactor—merely, Pyongyang insisted, to power its electrical grid. But the intelligence and nonproliferation agencies that monitored the North’s nuclear activities were expressing growing alarm. The DPRK had begun building two more powerful reactors, which would eventually be able to produce enough plutonium for forty-five bombs a year. Covert construction of a large plutonium-reprocessing facility had reportedly begun. Moreover, North Korea had quietly closed down the 5-MW reactor for almost 100 days in 1989. Although officials in Pyongyang claimed the shutdown was for routine maintenance, international intelligence agencies weren’t so sure: the duration of the shutdown would have allowed North Korea to completely refuel the reactor, generating material that could be processed into enough weapons-grade plutonium for one or two nuclear weapons.

No mechanism was in place to inspect or verify the activities of the reclusive Communist state, but by September 1991 Bush administration officials felt conditions might finally be right for a shift in U.S. policy toward North Korea. Their goal was to open up the North's hitherto-opaque nuclear program and to put a stop to its increasingly aggressive program of nuclear-weapons construction.

Several factors contributed to the Bush administration's assessment. By the 1980s, North Korea's isolation, unwise agricultural practices, and heavy investment in the military at the expense of other ventures had contributed to a serious economic decline. With few trading partners and little to trade, the North's estimated GNP was a mere \$23.3 billion by 1991—less than a tenth of the South's \$273 billion. "Self-reliance may have looked like a good policy in

**What confluence
of factors led the
parties to the
negotiating table?**

1945 when Kim Il Sung came of age," says Bruce Cumings, an historian and Korea expert, "but it doesn't look very good in a world without borders today."⁶ North Korea was also losing the few major allies and trading partners it had had to the economically booming ROK. The Soviet Union recognized South Korea in 1990 and ended its aid and trade concessions to the DPRK the next year.

China did \$2 billion worth of trade with South Korea in 1991, about five times its estimated trade with North Korea. Moreover, South Korea was admitted to the United Nations in 1991 with Chinese and Soviet support, despite North Korea's wish to be the Peninsula's sole representative.

Fears about its bomb program were also hurting North Korea's tentative attempts to reach out. In 1991 Japan cut off normalization talks, the South suspended the modest trade initiatives between the two countries, and the United States cancelled troop withdrawals from South Korea begun the previous year.⁷ Kim and the North's elite must also have been shaken by the failures of other longstanding Communist regimes: the breaching of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the overthrow the same year of Romania's dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu, with whom Kim reportedly identified closely, and the coup in the Soviet Union that preceded its 1991 collapse.

In the wake of these radical realignments, Pyongyang began to make overtures to the United States. In fact, some Korea watchers believe the isolated regime had been trying to engage the United States since the early 1970s. Selig Harrison, senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, met with Kim Il Sung in 1972 as one of the first American journalists to enter the country after the Korean War, and later pressed the United States to relax restrictions on North Korea. With modest exceptions, though, the United States continued to prohibit direct contact between representatives of the two gov-

ernments. "North Korea was viewed as the most repugnant totalitarian regime in the world, and we didn't want to have anything to do with them," Harrison explains. "South Korea has also done its best to make sure that we didn't have any improvement of relations with North Korea."⁸

A THAWING RELATIONSHIP

In this period of global change, however, the Bush administration began to consider modifying its policy, particularly if it might induce the DPRK to come clean on its nuclear program. Both the United States and South Korea may have been influenced by Germany's painful reunification following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Korea experts agreed that assimilation problems in the event of a sudden failure of the DPRK regime would dwarf those experienced in Germany, leading many policymakers to stress the merits of a gradual reconciliation over sudden short-term reunification.

Two avenues for engaging the North showed promise. First was the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), an international agreement designed to check the spread of nuclear weapons.⁹ North Korea had signed the NPT in 1985 at the Soviet Union's urging, but had never negotiated the safeguards agreement required within 18 months of entry. If it finally complied, Pyongyang's nuclear program would become more transparent: not only would North Korea have to provide a list of nuclear facilities to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), an arm of the United Nations, it would also have to open its facilities to IAEA inspectors. International pressure on North Korea to fulfil its safeguards obligations had been growing, but Pyongyang refused to comply until the United States removed its nuclear weapons from South Korea and pledged not to use nuclear weapons against the regime.

Even more promising, in the eyes of many in the Bush administration, was a regional denuclearization agreement. Despite tensions between North and South, the two Koreas had begun drafting a plan requiring both to remain nuclear-weapons-free. Such a "two-sided" strategy was doubly appealing to the United States, one official confides, since it would also deter the South, which had shelved its own nuclear ambitions only in response to U.S. admonitions. Some in government described the North-South approach as "parallel" to the NPT. Others—chastened by the discovery that Iraq had come close to developing nuclear weapons despite IAEA inspections—saw it as a reinforcement, or even replacement. Indeed, the belated discovery of Iraq's nuclear-bomb program had severely undermined the Vienna-based agency's credibility as an effective monitor. "In the Gulf War, we saw the limits of the IAEA in terms of undeclared nuclear activities," says Robert Manning, then adviser to the

assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. "We all wanted to have a mechanism where, if something was detected, there could be some kind of short-term challenge-inspection capability [that would give the U.S. the ability to demand inspections of specified North Korean facilities on short notice]." ¹⁰

In September 1991, the United States gave a nudge to the nuclear logjam when President Bush announced the unilateral withdrawal of all U.S. ground- and sea-launched tactical nuclear weapons employed abroad. ¹¹ Two months later, ROK President Roh Tae Woo declared that there were no nuclear weapons in the South. Bush's decree was intended to elicit a response in kind from the soon-to-topple Soviet Union, but it did double duty by stripping North Korea of its main excuse for not cooperating with the IAEA.

The weapons withdrawal, coupled with hints that the United States might reward North Korean cooperation with direct dialogue, helped initiate a string of auspicious events. On December 13, 1991, North and South completed an agreement pledging eventual reconciliation and nonaggression. On December 31, the two Koreas signed the North-South Declaration on a Non-Nuclear Korean Peninsula, the most sweeping arms control accord ever. Under the pact, neither country could "test, manufacture, produce, accept, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons." Nor could either possess a reprocessing facility, a restriction ignored in the NPT. Although implementation still had to be negotiated, the agreement was to go into effect by February 21, 1992. North and South privately agreed that on January 7 there would be two simultaneous announcements. The ROK, with Bush administration backing, would suspend its annual Team Spirit military exercise with the United States for the first time since the war maneuvers began in 1976. ¹² And the DPRK would announce its willingness to sign its long-overdue NPT safeguards agreement.

U.S. officials greeted the North-South denuclearization agreement with enthusiasm tinged with skepticism. Some believed the North had its own reasons for backing the agreement, such as gaining access to U.S. military facilities in the South to confirm withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons. Others believed the North only signed to win a meeting with the United States. In any event, the Bush administration informed North Korea in January that it was ready to hold a high-level meeting for the first time since the Korean War.

The extent of North Korea's nuclear program remained to be revealed, but 1992 began on a high note. The unprecedented series of breakthroughs—dual UN entry, withdrawal of U.S. nuclear weapons, joint North-South agreements, suspension of Team Spirit, North Korea's promise to sign the safeguards agreement, and upcoming U.S.-DPRK dialogue—led one magazine to declare, "The Korean Peninsula looked a little safer this week." ¹³ Adds General Brent Scowcroft, Bush's national security adviser, "There was some hope that the North

was finally emerging from its isolation and was prepared to become a more normal member of international society."⁴

A FIRST MEETING

The U.S. decision to hold high-level talks was not made lightly. According to Arnold Kanter, the undersecretary for Political Affairs chosen to meet with the DPRK, "It was politically significant that someone at my level was meeting with the North Koreans after almost forty years."⁵ But the Kanter meeting represented a compromise between those who favored a positive gesture toward the North and those who considered any meeting inappropriate.

Kanter believes the North Koreans hoped for a joint communiqué and the promise of a second meeting, but they got neither. The administration's mixed feelings were reconciled, Kanter says, by holding the meeting but delivering a tough message. "If they lived up to their obligations, and if they followed through on what they'd agreed to do, both in a bilateral context and in the NPT context, then that would open the door to them partaking of the economic miracle that was going on in East Asia," he explains in summarizing the U.S. position. "If they chose the other path, they would continue to be isolated politically, undermined economically, their people would suffer, and their regime didn't have a future." The DPRK was also to stop missile exports, adhere to international rules on chemical and biological weapons, return the remains of MIAs, renounce terrorism, and improve human rights.⁶

Why did Kanter end up with so little flexibility to negotiate?

What the United States would do in response was stated in more general terms. "We did not even talk about normalizing relations," recalls Richard Solomon, assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. "We talked about improving relations, but we were under pretty strict instructions not to seem to take that dialogue very far."⁷ The United States, after all, had removed its tactical nuclear weapons and suspended Team Spirit. Now it was time for North Korea to deliver.

The DPRK delegation may have left disappointed, but one U.S. participant who applauds Kanter for treating the North Koreans "like people from planet Earth" describes the meeting as "the catalyzing diplomatic effort" that convinced the DPRK to comply with the NPT and accept IAEA inspections. North Korea signed the safeguards agreement and submitted a report describing its nuclear materials and seven nuclear sites. In May, Hans Blix, the IAEA's director general, visited the declared facilities.

The Bush administration had cause to celebrate. But the appearance of unanimity and cooperation turned out to be an illusion. Within a few months, both IAEA inspections and North-South talks began to unravel.

DEADLOCK AND DETERIORATION

By mid-1992 the North and South had met repeatedly but remained deadlocked over the de-nuclearization agreement. Partly at the urging of U.S. experts, South Korea was pushing an intrusive inspection regimen that would include challenge inspections of declared and suspected nuclear sites. North Korea maintained that this was a ruse to get access to its military sites, and insisted that each inspection be mutually approved in advance.

As the process inched forward, Robert Carlin, chief of the State Department Intelligence and Research Bureau's Northeast Asia Division, claims that South

What were the
key barriers
to reaching
agreement?

Korean hard-liners decided to sabotage the talks. First, South Korean intelligence agents publicized the discovery of a North Korean spy ring, a move he believes was meant to irritate the North. In October the South Koreans warned that the Team Spirit war games would be reinstated in 1993 unless the North-South talks progressed. "It was guaranteed to stop the process because it's hold-

ing a gun to North Korea's head," Carlin explains. "Normally the announcement for Team Spirit came in December or January. Announcing it in October was either an ill-conceived move—which it was—or it was part provocation."⁸ DPRK representatives said they would suspend the North-South talks unless Team Spirit was canceled. Washington and Seoul, however, continued to predi-
cate the decision about Team Spirit on progress in North-South talks.

Meanwhile, the IAEA inspections were going bad. North Korea had admitted producing mere "laboratory" amounts of plutonium in 1990. But by late 1992 IAEA inspectors had discovered inconsistencies, raising the suspicion that North Korea had reprocessed more than it had reported. The IAEA eventually concluded that the DPRK had separated plutonium at three different times. In January 1993, citing evidence of unreported fuel diversion, the IAEA demanded to inspect two undeclared sites suspected of harboring nuclear waste.

Some Korea experts attribute the simultaneous deterioration of the North-South talks and the IAEA inspections to the North digging in its heels because it had not reaped the rewards it expected for compliance. But the United States had never contemplated rewarding the DPRK simply for fulfilling its international obligations. Kanter says he would have liked to make some tangible offer, but just getting the single meeting "was swimming upstream as it was." More-

over, both the United States and South Korea had other priorities in late 1992. “Two of the three governments involved, Seoul and Washington, were not able to pay close attention because they were in the midst of elections and then transitions,” explains Carlini of the State Department. “So in a very crucial period . . . there was no capacity for either government to respond to anything the North Koreans put out.”

HARDENED POSTURES

As two new presidents—Bill Clinton and Seoul’s Kim Young Sam—took office in early 1993, the North-South talks remained frozen and tensions spiraled higher between North Korea and the IAEA. North Korea had refused the IAEA’s request to examine the two suspect waste sites, insisting that they were military facilities. In February the IAEA requested “special inspections” of the two sites, citing U.S. intelligence photos of clumsily concealed underground storage tanks.¹⁹ The IAEA’s Board of Governors gave North Korea one month to allow special inspections, after which it would refer the matter to the UN Security Council.

The IAEA ruling, and in particular its use of U.S. intelligence, enraged the North Koreans, who claimed the United States was manipulating the IAEA. Many observers speculate that DPRK leaders were angry at having been caught in a clumsy lie. “When they signed up with the IAEA, they were looking at the old IAEA and they got the post-Iraq IAEA,” explains William Clark, Richard Solomon’s successor as assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. “The IAEA came in like gangbusters, and the North said, ‘Whoa! Wait a minute. That’s not what we signed on for. You guys are supposed to come and dust lightly and go away.’”²⁰ Some Korea experts assert that the IAEA, anxious to prove itself after its failure in Iraq, was overzealous about unmasking the DPRK nuclear program. There was also a matter of “face,” since Kim Il Sung had denied the existence of a bomb program for years.

In any event, most officials in the new Clinton administration applauded the IAEA’s aggressive stance and considered it essential not to interfere in the agency’s affairs. The NPT would come up for renewal in 1995, and North Korean defiance of the IAEA could set a dangerous precedent and endanger the treaty’s renewal prospects. “We were getting pressured by other countries,” explains Kent Wiedemann, then National Security Council senior director for Asia, “especially our European friends and allies, who tended to see this thing almost exclusively as an issue of maintaining the integrity of the global non-proliferation regime.”²¹

On March 8 the annual Team Spirit military exercise began. Four days later, North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the NPT—the first

member ever to threaten to do so. The IAEA demand for special inspections was, the North declared, "an undisguised strong-arm act designed to disarm the DPRK and strangle our socialist system." North Korea's withdrawal would begin in ninety days, and would last "until the U.S. nuclear threats and the unjust conduct of the IAEA against the DPRK will be recognized to have been removed."

**What was the
DPRK trying to
achieve?**

AN UNPREPARED RESPONSE TEAM

North Korea's announcement gave new urgency to debate within the United States and the IAEA about the status of the DPRK's nuclear program. It also brought North Korea to sudden prominence in the consciousness of the American public. But figuring out how to respond was not easy. The Clinton administration was new on the job, and according to some State Department insiders North Korea's intransigence did not immediately capture the White House's attention. Within the State Department, it was unclear who would manage the nuclear conflict. turf battles muddled the process. So many bureaus claimed a stake in the issue that the first press releases had to be cleared through twelve offices. Moreover, most political appointees were still subject to confirmation hearings.

Confronted with this confusion, the East Asian and Pacific Bureau's Korea Desk became a de-facto clearinghouse for ideas and initiatives, and a senior-level interagency working group formed to coordinate the administration's response. Initially, key members from State included Thomas Hubbard, deputy assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs; Gary Samore, deputy director of the Political Military Bureau's Office of Regional Nonproliferation; Robert Carlin of Intelligence and Research; and Kenneth Quinones, an officer on the Korea Desk. Representatives from other agencies included Daniel Poreman, the NSC's senior director for Nonproliferation and Export Controls; Kent Wiedemann, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Asia and the Pacific; Captain Thomas Flanagan, chief of the Joint Staff's Asia/Pacific Division; and Norman Wulf, deputy assistant director of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

The State Department, drawing on Gulf War lessons about the value of multilateral coalitions, was already working international forums. Pressed by the U.S. to take a position, the IAEA found North Korea in "noncompliance" with

**Did the United
States do a good
job of organizing to
meet this challenge?
If not, why not?**

its safeguards agreement in April 1994. The matter was referred to the UN Security Council, which issued a mildly worded statement calling for the inspection controversy to be resolved.

Meanwhile, the interagency group furiously debated how to answer North Korea's challenge. The DPRK had called for high-level talks with the United States as a way to resolve its disputes with the IAEA, and some officials at State saw such direct contact as the most promising option. A Department of Defense task force had recommended that the United States shift its focus from getting "special inspections" to eliminating Pyongyang's entire nuclear program. A few in the administration were even ready to let North Korea drop out of the NPT. The precedent of withdrawal would be damaging but, in the words of Norman Wulf of the interagency group, "If they're going to be flagrantly violating it, I'd just as soon have them outside the treaty than staying inside and destroying it from within."²²

RISKS AND OPTIONS

As the conflict simmered, the State Department prepared for a second round at the Security Council. "The question was: what do we do to punish North Korea for taking this step? And that set off a fairly serious debate within the U.S. government," recalls Robert Suettinger, then a deputy national intelligence officer at the National Intelligence Council. "Do you impose sanctions? What kind of sanctions? How effective will they be? How do you enforce them? Do you enforce them militarily? Do you try to insist on the Chinese abiding by it? The whole range of questions."²³

It quickly became clear to those working the UN process that the first step would have to be something far short of full economic sanctions. There were serious questions about the effectiveness of further isolating an already isolated regime: North Korea's only significant economic interactions were the oil and other goods it received from China, and cash remittances from Koreans living in Japan. Moreover, neither Japan's nor China's cooperation could be assumed. China had already indicated its reluctance to pressure its long-time ally, and, as a permanent member of the Security Council, it could veto any sanctions resolution.

Even were a resolution passed, analysts feared, it might only spur the North to redouble its bomb-building efforts, with potentially catastrophic consequences. If North Korea went nuclear, its near neighbors, including South Korea and Japan, might feel compelled to amass nuclear arsenals.²⁴ Furthermore, Pyongyang already exported ballistic missiles to such countries as Libya and Iran for cash, and most analysts believed it would gladly sell nuclear bombs if it had them.

Finally, there was the threat of armed conflict. As pressure built for international censure, North Korea warned that UN sanctions would constitute a declaration of war—a threat many in the U.S. government took seriously. “There was all along a realization that we were dealing with a very difficult and unpredictable country,” says Robert Suettinger, “and that it was extremely difficult to discern what their trip wires were.”