

## America's Role for Peace on the Korean Peninsula

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### Abstract

*The US did not manage well some of its strategic relations with East Asia and Russia in the 1990s, thus, particularly at this pivotal turning point, must exercise considerable caution as well as wisdom in Korea.*

*The paper examines US foreign policy and finds a pattern of perceptions by other nations that the US has become increasingly self-interested now that it no longer confronts the Soviet Union. US policies in East Asia (e.g., the Asian financial crisis) and Russia suggest that a neomercantilist impulse rather than crusade for global economic development, democracy and human rights has dominated US foreign and trade policy. Moreover, NATO expansion and the drive for national missile defense run the risk of further alienating Russia and China and upsetting the strategic balance. It is suggested that a corruption of American's original sense of national interest has occurred, most clearly evident in post-Cold War policies. The author underscores that the US cannot effectively lead devoid of a sense of public-mindedness that goes beyond pure calculations of self-interest.*

*The implications of American's shift away from its long-held role of moral leadership are examined for the Korean peninsula. In general, US policy toward the DPRK has been characterized by "incrementalism," evidencing little willingness to engage the North on other than a mid-bureaucratic level, insufficient to improve relations and ease tensions. The US should constrain any anxiety over the potential security implications of inter-Korean agreements, and permit a natural evolution of roles and responsibilities in the creation of permanent peace in Korea.*

## The Lone Superpower in the Twenty-First Century

Earlier this year, former US defense secretary William Perry, who recently completed a congressionally mandated review of US policy toward North Korea, spoke about US strategy for the Asia-Pacific region:

I suggest to you that not only is the Cold War over, so also is the post-Cold War era—an era where it was sufficient to adapt and fine tune the security strategy that got us safely through the Cold War. We are struggling to formulate a new strategy for this new era—an era for which we do not yet have a name, much less a strategy.<sup>1</sup>

He suggested three guidelines for a new US strategy: (1) War cannot be an acceptable instrument of foreign policy in the twenty-first century as it was in the twentieth century because of the unprecedented destructive power of modern weapons; (2) Because of today's level of communications and transportation technology, US economic and security strategies must recognize that we are unavoidably one world; and (3) For the foreseeable future the US will remain the world's military, economic and technological leader. But he added, the US often does not know how to use its leadership. "We seem to oscillate between not using it at all or using it in ways that seem arrogant to other nations," he notes. Perry hopes that in time, the US decides how to use its power, and in ways that benefit the security and stability of all nations, not just of America.<sup>2</sup>

In these early months of the twenty-first century, reflection on the overall global American role is especially germane to a discussion of its future policy toward Korea. There has been considerable debate on the character of US foreign policy of the last seven years. Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger recently wrote that American decisions shape international events to an unprecedented degree, but "they have often appeared, especially to non-Americans, as either arbitrary or random responses to domestic constituencies." Kissinger warns that a "society that has never known a permanent threat has been tempted by the end of the Cold War to impose its

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1 William J. Perry, "Security and Stability in the Asia-Pacific Region," *PacNet Newsletter*, May 12, 2000, available at <http://www.csis.org/pacfor/pac0019.html>. Original address given on January 19, 2000.

2 Ibid.

preferences unilaterally, without calculating the reactions of other peoples or the long-range costs."<sup>3</sup> One American policy failing, he says, has been how to translate its moral values into an operational diplomacy.

Robert Kagan of the Carnegie Endowment writes that there is a new "present danger," one no longer found in a single adversary, that the

United States, the world's dominant power on whom the maintenance of international peace and the support of liberal democratic principles depend, will shrink from its responsibilities and—in a fit of absent-mindedness, or parsimony, or indifference—allow the international order that it created and sustains to collapse.<sup>4</sup>

Kagan and his co-author note that symptoms of this danger include flagging will and confusion about the US role in the world. They deride the contemporary understanding of American national interest as "consisting of plots of ground, sea lanes, industrial centers, strategic chokepoints, and the like." Rather, he believes that America's founding fathers would have defined national interest to not only include prosperity and security, but also the need to lift America into a place of honor among the world's great powers. Past American presidents and statesmen would never have imagined that a "term that can encompass a people's noblest aspirations, would come to possess a meaning as narrow and limited as many American thinkers give it today."<sup>5</sup> Kagan observes that George Kennan wrote over fifty years ago that the American people should feel a

certain gratitude to a Providence, which by providing [them] with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.<sup>6</sup>

Though the challenges have changed, the fundamental responsibilities have not, Kagan says.

*Los Angeles Times* journalists Tyler Marshall and Jim Mann write that

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3 Henry A. Kissinger, "How the U.S. is Wasting Its Global Predominance," *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 2000, p. M2.

4 Robert Kagan and William Kristol, "The Present Danger," *National Interest*, Spring 2000, pp. 57–69.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

America's prevailing power has long been welcome as a shield from tyranny, a beacon of goodwill, and an inspiration of unique values. But a decade since the collapse of communism, America's benevolent shadow is assuming a darker character. While policymakers sometimes dub it the "hegemony problem," Marshall and Mann observe that even American allies are "unsettled by fears that, in its hour of triumph, the United States seems to have lost its commitment to global community and the international order it helped create" after World War II. In the post-Cold War world, the Clinton years have seen a focus on new objectives: US commercial interests in a global economy, championing democracy and intervening militarily to protect human rights. The problem is these objectives have been pursued in a manner that appears inconsistent, sporadic and occasionally capricious.<sup>7</sup> The authors quote former Bush national security advisor Brent Scowcroft, who told them: "We don't think as much about the effects of our actions on other people. We don't consult, we don't ask ahead of time. We behave to much of the world like a latter-day colonial power."<sup>8</sup> As described by Marshall and Mann, the concern is not of a growing American isolationism or retreat from world affairs, but of a crass self-centeredness: a "me first" syndrome.

In the early years of the Clinton administration, according to Filipino scholar Renato Cruz de Castro, US foreign policy toward East Asia saw a distinct shift away from security matters and toward "opening up the world economy and making it safe for US business and its global system of capital accumulation."<sup>9</sup> He notes that in 1993 the US was conveying a clear and simple message to the world: "The United States is no longer the crusading superpower bent on preventing communist expansion. Rather, it is now similar to a big corporation competing in the global marketplace." In the view of East Asian states, Washington's plans were to open the region's markets to US products, strengthen its linkages with its economic partners, and integrate East Asian economies with those of North America.<sup>10</sup> The consequence of this orientation was the US had to downplay the importance of bilateral alliances if economics was to have primacy. Consequently, he says, "Washington's major

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7 Tyler Marshall and Jim Mann, "Goodwill Toward U.S. Is Dwindling Globally," *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 2000.

8 Ibid.

9 Renato Cruz de Castro, "Whither Geoeconomics? Bureaucratic Inertia in U.S. Post-Cold War Foreign Policy toward East Asia," *Asian Affairs* (Winter 2000), p. 202.

10 Ibid.

East Asian allies would go from being linchpins of US security in the region to being mere levers to open markets in the region." This mercantilist approach to regional affairs created uneasiness among many East Asian states afraid the US was about to redefine and even abdicate its regional security responsibilities. Ultimately, Cruz de Castro says, the Clinton administration was forced to increase its attention to defense in Asia and relegate foreign economic policy to a lower priority. This was due primarily to Clinton's preoccupation with domestic affairs and reluctance to pay much attention to East Asian affairs, enabling bureaucracies to make decisions that were often formulated in the narrowest terms, were reactive and driven by crises.<sup>11</sup> The US handling of the North Korean nuclear issue, which rose to prominence in 1993 and 1994, appears to be a good example.

President Clinton did not emphasize geoeconomics in East Asia to the degree originally intended, but the impact was still substantial. In the view of some East Asian states, notably Malaysia, American commercial policies—coupled with International Monetary Fund (IMF) policies closely linked to Washington's—were more to blame for the 1997–98 Asian financial crisis than the domestic policies of the affected countries. To some extent, what East Asians have seen from the US over the past seven years has been policies that they often regard as self-interested and, by some, even exploitative. Joseph Stiglitz, former chief economist at the World Bank, in a stinging critique of Washington's Asian economic policy, recently asked "...did America—and the IMF—push policies because we...believed the policies would help East Asia or because we believed they would benefit financial interests in the United States and the advanced industrial world?" As a participant in the events of the Asian financial crisis, he says their policies definitely contributed to increased economic volatility, whatever the true motivation behind the policies.<sup>12</sup> Amazingly, South Korea, as the Asian nation to receive the largest IMF loan during the crisis, was the first to recover, ironically assisted by the strong American economy.

Neither a neomercantilist approach toward foreign policy nor a bureaucratically driven one is commensurate with the stature and inherent responsibilities of the sole superpower on today's international stage. What is repug-

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11 Ibid., p. 217.

12 Joseph Stiglitz, "What I Learned at the World Economic Crisis," *New Republic*, April 24, 2000. Stiglitz is now a professor of economics at Stanford University.

nant to many about the Asian financial crisis—which then spread to Russia and Brazil—is that US and IMF policies, whatever their motivation, significantly aggravated economic conditions in many of the affected countries. Critics of these policies make clear that Western investors were the primary beneficiaries while the general populations of the affected countries bore the brunt of economic adversity.<sup>13</sup>

With the arrival of new Russian president Vladimir Putin, previous US policy toward Russia in the 1990s has been subjected to new criticism in both the economic and security dimensions. The significance of this is that if the preeminent United States has mishandled even its defeated Cold War nemesis, then something must be intrinsically wrong with the present American self-conception of its global role and responsibility. This subject deserves greater attention in this paper because of potential lessons for Korea.

Russia in 2000 is a far cry from what it was in 1992, when Americans and Russians both harbored great hopes for democratization and prosperity. Russia has seen a decade of chaos, deepened poverty and corruption, and today is often anti-American in rhetoric and outlook. Although the US succeeded in weakening Russia as a military rival, making it less dangerous to the United States, it failed to foresee that its policies, and concomitant claims to have the answers, only played into the hands of Russian oligarchs whose heist of the former Soviet economy thwarted genuine economic reform and impoverished most Russians. Moreover, despite greater comprehension of Russian realities later in the 1990s, misguided American commercial policies continued.

Noted Russian journalist and author Yevgenia Albats says that she is not sure that US policy “at any step along the way was ever thought out well enough to understand what was being created. There was no effort made in order to figure out the reality in Russia.” There was only the perception that democracy and a market economy could be quickly set up.<sup>14</sup>

E. Wayne Merry, former chief political analyst in the US Embassy in

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13 In addition to Stiglitz, see for example the writings of economists Jeffrey Sachs of Harvard University, Paul Krugman of MIT, and former Reagan administration senior officials Martin Feldstein and George Shultz.

14 Interview with Yevgenia Albats, “U.S. Policy on Russia during the Yeltsin Era,” interviewed for the PBS program *Frontline* (broadcast on May 9, 2000), available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/yeltsin/policy/policy.html>.

Moscow from 1990 to 1994, observes that although the US wanted to see the growth of democracy and rule of law in Russia along with capitalism and a market economy, America chose the latter. "We chose the freeing of prices, privatization of industry, and the creation of [an] unregulated capitalism, and essentially hoped that the rule of law, civil society, and representative democracy would develop somehow automatically as a result of that."<sup>15</sup> Merry observes that this was an untested ideological view prevalent in Washington applicable to societies like post-Soviet Russia. He adds,

I think our attitude was that what Russia really needed in its culture was the idea of greed. . . . [Because Soviet egalitarian culture had been so deadening to individual initiative] there was a view that a little greed would be a very healthy thing in Russia. . . . [W]hat many of these people did not understand was that greed had been part and parcel of the Soviet Communist system.<sup>16</sup>

Alternatively, Merry argues, what Russia really needed was a "new culture of law [and] civic society, not a culture of greed."

Merry's successor at the Moscow embassy, Thomas Graham, observes the US "eroded support for the democratic processes. We created the impression that the United States itself was not particularly concerned about the democratic development of Russia—that what was important was this economic side."<sup>17</sup> He adds, the view was "one of intellectual arrogance, both [in Washington] and in Russia, that if people didn't understand this, it was because of a certain amount of ignorance, not because they have legitimate concerns."

In the security realm affecting Russia, the Clinton administration pushed for NATO enlargement—granting membership to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic despite Moscow's protestations. What likely began as a 1996 Clinton campaign promise before ethnic voters gained momentum until America's NATO allies and Congress were on board. While these three transition states had made impressive political and economic progress since 1989, NATO is a military alliance, not an economic grouping like the European Union or OECD. Russia understandably perceives that NATO is still directed against a potential threat in the East. Many experts argued that there

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with E. Wayne Merry.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Thomas Graham. Graham is now with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

was no strategic imperative for NATO enlargement when the consequence was fostering a Russian sense of isolation and threat.<sup>18</sup> They argued that NATO expansion would signal US abandonment of its strategic partnership with Russia, and would repudiate Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev's aim of building a "common European home." In sum, they maintained that inclusion of central European states into NATO could contribute to the emergence of precisely the renewed threat that NATO sought to avoid. The haste with which it was carried out in 1998 was even more astonishing.

Equally bewildering today, and reminiscent of the haste for NATO expansion during 1997 and 1998, is the current drive by the Clinton administration (supported by Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush) to build a national missile defense (NMD)—on which a decision is expected later this year. North Korea's ballistic missile program, including missile exports, is often cited as the principal reason for urging NMD deployment. Proponents argue that rogue states could constitute a threat to the territory of the United States, and if the US now possesses the technology to protect itself (a debatable presumption), it should do so. However, once again, Russia is alarmed, and this time joined by China, who perceive that NMD is not ultimately aimed at rogue states but at themselves. They claim that American NMD fundamentally alters the strategic balance as well as the Asian balance of power, and could provoke a new arms race. What is fundamentally a politically driven issue in the US, popular with a Republican Congress, if adopted by the Clinton administration, may further alienate Russia and undermine delicate relations with China. Germany has already warned that deployment of NMD could destroy European cohesion and urges that it be debated among America's European partners.<sup>19</sup>

A disturbing picture emerges of much US foreign policy in the 1990s: at

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18 For example, Susan Eisenhower, "Testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee," March 19, 1998, available at <http://www.cpss.org/nato/testfinl.htm>; "Starting Cold War II," *Naval Institute Proceedings*, May 1998. She is Chairman of the Center for Political and Strategic Studies and the granddaughter of President Dwight Eisenhower. Other Soviet and arms control specialists who opposed NATO expansion included George Kennan, Paul Nitze, Raymond Garthoff, Fred Ikle, and former Senator Sam Nunn.

19 Deborah Charles, "Clinton Honored—and Warned—in Europe," *Reuters*, June 2, 2000. For Asian and Korean reactions to NMD, Frank Ching, "Scrap the National Missile Shield," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, June 8, 2000; Tong-chin Rhee, "The NMD's geopolitical ripples," *Korea Times*, June 5, 2000.



best, of uncertainty and ambiguity as to its proper role, along with poor planning, organization and implementation; at worst, of abased self-interest and willful ignorance of the consequences of strategic decisions. Just as the United States has not handled well many of the "big decisions" on Korea over the past half-century, often due to cultural and strategic biases, America exhibits from the preceding examples troubling trends in overall military, political and economic policies. Poorly devised policy could undermine the global gains of the post-Cold War era and unintentionally re-create strategic threats. There are enormous geopolitical consequences to mishandling Russia and China.

Moreover, the lone superpower is most responsible to prevent a new division of the world into rich and poor, instead of capitalist and communist, a subject President Clinton himself has recently addressed.<sup>20</sup> Without doubt, there is a widening wealth and income gap between a very small elite and multitudes of poor in every country, and between developed and developing nations. These growing economic imbalances have promoted conflicts, starvation, crime and corruption, environmental destruction and the suppression of human potential. It is worth noting that proponents of the economic theories of the late Louis Kelso argue that these problems can be addressed in the twenty-first century by providing access to capital ownership as a fundamental human right, and by the democratization of capital credit so that each person as an owner could eventually gain income independence through the profits from one's capital. These proponents maintain that when every American has a viable capital ownership stake in a growing economy, America's moral leadership will be restored as it sets an example for the world as to how to achieve genuine economic democracy and justice. The world would thus benefit, they say, from the decentralization of economic power, enabling people's greater control over their economic destinies and the ability to work creatively for the common good.<sup>21</sup>

The basis of American leadership must be national interest understood in its broadest, most value-laden sense. Benevolence, magnanimity and national

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20 "Press Conference of President William Clinton, Prime Minister Antonio Guterres, and European Union Commission president Romano Prodi," Lisbon, Portugal, May 31, 2000.

21 Norman G. Kurland and Dawn K. Brohawn, "Louis Kelso's Economic Vision for the 21st Century," Center for Economic and Social Justice, March 2000, available at <http://www.cesj.org/thirdway/kelsovision.html>. Kurland is president of the CESJ.

sacrifice, when required, were once the hallmarks of American national power as perceived by other nations. Today, the resistance by some nations to globalization is not merely economic, but cultural—it has become synonymous with Americanization. No less a scholar than George Kennan, in observing America's lone superpower status in the late 1990s, remarked about the "vacuous quality" of American commercial culture, which portrays the US as the "world's intellectual and spiritual dunce."<sup>22</sup> Hence, from this perspective, it is not hard to understand what other countries deride as America's "me first" foreign policy, and why many nations contend the US seeks to Americanize the world in its image. The "hegemony problem" certainly allows for inevitable misunderstanding of US good intentions. Yet, there is an international perception, more than the matter of understandable resentment toward American preponderance, of a corruption of America's notion of its national interest. There is a sense of erosion in the character and caliber of American global leadership; that the US has embraced a sophisticated form of mercantilism yet its foreign and trade policies are deprived of the Judeo-Christian underpinnings that once anchored it.<sup>23</sup>

In the eyes of many non-Americans, the US is in many ways morally, ethically and strategically adrift, caught up in a worldview based on national self-centeredness. The US cannot effectively lead devoid of a sense of genuine public-mindedness which goes beyond pure calculations of self-interest. America's Judeo-Christian political culture was a reservoir for that spirit from World War II partway through the Cold War, which enabled the US to bear the great political and military responsibilities of the past, but it steadily declined thereafter. That decline makes US advocacy of globalization, democracy and human rights rather hollow, because after the defeat of communism, the moral and ethical basis for these principles within American political culture became much more relativistic.

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22 Richard Ullman, "The U.S. and the World: An Interview with George Kennan," *New York Review of Books*, August 12, 1999.

23 For a view of American national interest by Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush, as articulated by his foreign policy advisor, see Condoleezza Rice, "Promoting the National Interest: Life After the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* (January–February 2000).

## The Lone Superpower and the Korean Peninsula

When it comes to peace, stability and reconciliation in Korea, America must clearly avoid acting on the basis of the rather empty and self-interested values it has come to represent for many in the 1990s. Obliviousness to the sensitivities and needs of both Koreas by a US seeking to maximize its leverage at a crucial turning point can lead to strategic blunders whose consequences will echo throughout the region. In this context, some general observations are in order on US policy toward the two Koreas over the last decade.<sup>24</sup> The traditional American policy of deterrence in Korea had great difficulty adjusting to the post-Cold War period. Though North Korea did not change its stripes, the security environment around the peninsula altered dramatically with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Several lost opportunities or strategic errors in the past decade stand out.

Revolutionary changes began to occur in 1990 with Gorbachev's June meeting with ROK President Roh Tae-woo, and subsequent dual Korea policy of the Soviet Union, the inception of North-South prime ministerial dialogue, the visit of Japanese power broker Shin Kanemaru to Pyongyang improving DPRK-Japan ties, and the continuing rise of Sino-ROK trade. While US officials, such as Kissinger, had once argued for a policy of cross-recognition in Northeast Asia, the US took no dramatic steps whatsoever. Instead, US policy statements in late 1990—likely influenced by the climate after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait—appeared unswayed by dramatic regional developments, including the inter-Korean dialogue. Already, the US had become transfixed with North Korea's nuclear program and implementation of its safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>25</sup> While a vital security concern, as early as 1990 the US chose to pursue the emerging nuclear issue with the North in a highly public, confront-

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24 For an excellent discussion of the problems of US Asian policy in the 1990s, and analysis of characterizations of the US as a "benevolent hegemon," "incompetent hegemon" and "ambiguous hegemon" in the post-Cold War era, Edward A. Olsen, "Changing U.S.-Korean Security Relations," *International Journal of Korean Studies* (Spring 1997), pp. 27-48.

25 For example, see the address by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Richard Solomon, "Asian Security in the 1990s: Integration in Economics, Diversity in Defense," *U.S. Department of State Dispatch*, November 5, 1990 [speech given October 30, 1990].

tational manner that excluded resolution in a much less public but perhaps more effective manner. The sheer lack of a relationship between the US and DPRK (beyond intermittent political counselor dialogue begun in 1989) only made such a choice easier. Yet, creative application of a balance-of-power approach might have led the US instead to dramatically improve its relationship with the North by raising the dialogue to a significantly high level and quietly but effectively negotiating at the onset. Instead, resolution of the nuclear issue was drawn out for four more years until the US got to the very point it wished to avoid, a crisis.

What is further astonishing is that when one high-level US-DPRK meeting did take place in New York in January 1992, between US under-secretary of state Arnold Kanter and Korean Worker's Party international affairs secretary Kim Yong Sun, Kim was informed that the meeting's purpose was purely informational and no continuation of the high-level dialogue was contemplated. It was a "comply, then we will talk" approach.<sup>26</sup> This policy decision was despite the historical signing a month earlier of the inter-Korean Basic Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation, and Joint Denuclearization Declaration, which although unimplemented, remain the basis of North-South relations.

By June 1994, the nuclear issue had reached almost the point of no return: by rapidly unloading spent fuel rods from its Yongbyon nuclear reactor without IAEA supervision, the North was deliberately provoking a major crisis with the US, because plutonium could easily be extracted from those fuel rods. Crisis provocation can be a sign that no other avenue remains for a small power to gain the attention of a major international actor. In the twentieth century history of Korea, the importance of the peninsula to the US was always a recurrent question, and for the North, in the last decade it became an obsession. The American response to the North's precipitous actions was to attempt to impose sanctions on the North in the UN Security Council. The problem was imposition of sanctions, since the UN was a

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26 Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1997); Leon Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995). For a Russian perspective on the North Korean nuclear issue, see James Clay Moltz and Alexandre Y. Mansourov, eds., *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy, and New Perspectives from Russia* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

belligerent in the Korean War and an armistice was still in effect, would have been regarded by the DPRK as a declaration of war. In many respects, the US had diplomatically painted itself into a corner with no way to back out.

Moreover, by the admission of senior officials such as Secretary of Defense Perry and Ambassador Robert Gallucci (the key negotiator with the North), the US came close to a military conflict with the North. Perry has repeatedly insisted that because the North said it would consider sanctions an act of war, he believed the threat of North Korean retaliation had to be taken seriously. He acknowledged that a detailed review of American war contingency plans in Korea was undertaken and preparations begun for sizable troop reinforcements to be sent to the ROK.<sup>27</sup> What has also become known is that the Pentagon had drawn up plans to send cruise missiles and F-117 stealth fighters to the region to strike the Yongbyon nuclear reactor to prevent the North from recovering the raw material to make nuclear bombs. But as Gallucci later admitted, "I believe [an air strike] would have resulted almost certainly in war," in which up to one million deaths were forecast.<sup>28</sup> Perry likewise concurred that an attack would certainly lead to war. Meanwhile, the US Embassy was definitely about to begin an evacuation of American civilians from Korea, a step normally undertaken when hostilities appear imminent. Last month, then ROK President Kim Young-sam, in an interview with *Hankyoreh Shinmun*, went so far as to claim that he personally persuaded President Clinton not to strike the Yongbyon facilities, thus saving the peninsula from war.<sup>29</sup> While Kim's account of personal intervention cannot be independently corroborated, it nonetheless underscores how dangerous the situation became. This crisis brought the US and ROK closer to war with the North than they had been since 1953. US policy toward the DPRK became so narrowly focused and oblivious to the wider picture that a war of horrendous costs for the US and Korea was barely averted.

An aspect of this crisis that requires explanation is why the North so rapidly brought the nuclear crisis to the brink. Beyond compelling America's full attention, profound DPRK domestic considerations played a key role. According to the director of an American NGO active in engaging the North

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27 Perry, "Security and Stability in the Asia-Pacific Region."

28 Jamie McIntyre, "Washington was on brink of war with North Korea 5 years ago," CNN, October 4, 1999, available at <http://www.cnn.com/US/9910/04/korea.brink/>.

29 "South Korea stopped US strike on North Korea: former president," *Agence France-Presse*, May 24, 2000.

and which previously succeeded in brokering CNN's reporting from Pyongyang in spring 1994, Kim Jong-il knew his father Kim Il Sung was dying. Senior North Korean officials told this NGO director that the younger Kim deliberately escalated the crisis in order to compel the US to deal with the North while his father remained alive. Only his father could set in motion a dramatic new direction in DPRK policy toward the US around which the nation would unite. If Kim Il Sung were to pass away, Kim Jong-il alone would have had far greater difficulty resolving the crisis.<sup>30</sup> Thus, for the North, the nuclear crisis of June 1994 was a desperate gamble.

Though officials on both sides of the Pacific are reluctant to admit it, former President Jimmy Carter's sudden visit in mid-June to Pyongyang and meetings with Kim Il Sung clearly averted war.<sup>31</sup> In discussions with Carter, Kim not only agreed to freeze his nuclear program in exchange for US provision of proliferation-resistant light water reactors, but also offered to hold a summit meeting with ROK President Kim Young-sam. Formal American negotiations with the North later began in Geneva, leading to the Agreed Framework of October 1994, the foundation of present US-DPRK relations.

Carter clearly was dismayed not only with the US approach toward North Korea, but with what he felt was an astonishing American ignorance of its reality. US policy toward the North was driven by arms control and non-proliferation experts, not by regional specialists. Moreover, he claimed that US intelligence was derived largely from satellites and the ROK, but little use was made of the handful of Americans who had first-hand knowledge of the North (prior to his departure, Carter valued briefings from the Rev. Billy Graham and CNN International president Eason Jordan, each of whom had met Kim Il Sung, more than those received from the intelligence community).<sup>32</sup> Upon returning to Seoul, Carter conveyed Kim Il Sung's summit

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30 Lecture by Antonio Betancourt, Executive Director, Summit Council for World Peace, at the Korea Institute for National Unification, Seoul, Korea, February 14, 2000. The Summit Council is an association of former heads of state and government based in Washington, DC that has acted in a facilitating capacity between the two Koreas, the US and China.

31 Carter said after his visit, "The administration has said there was no crisis. I thought there was an impending crisis, and now the crisis is over." "Carter interview on North Korea progress," CNN, June 22, 1994, retrieved through Lexis-Nexis database.

32 Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*. Ch. 6; remarks by former

invitation to President Kim Young-sam, who accepted and began immediate preparations. Unfortunately, Kim Il Sung died on July 8, days before the summit was to have been held, and the opportunity the South had to display good will toward the North upon that occasion was quickly squandered. Yet, the events of June 1994 revealed the strategic flaws of US policy toward the North up to that point. It took a former US president—with no official backing, and, who in contrast to the Clinton administration, sought to engage the regime at its highest level—to succeed in defusing the crisis, lay the basis for resolution of the nuclear issue, and convey the opportunity for an unprecedented inter-Korean summit.

After the Agreed Framework was signed in fall 1994, the ensuing period to date characterizing US policy toward the North has been marked by lack of meaningful progress, imagination and, until the last year and a half, of senior-level attention from the Clinton administration.<sup>33</sup> Until William Perry's fact-finding trip to Pyongyang in May 1999, and meeting with the number-two DPRK leader, SPA President Kim Young-nam, no comparable high-level dialogue to the 1992 Kanter–Kim Yong-sun meeting ever took place. The

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President Jimmy Carter at a panel discussion on "North Korea and Security on the Korean Peninsula," Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, November 11, 1999 (audio archive, available at <http://www.foreigntv.com/council/>); Mark P. Barry, *Contemporary American Relations with North Korea: 1987–1994*, PhD dissertation, 1996, Ch 7., available at <http://www.cableaz.com/users/mpbarry>.

- 33 For thoughtful recent articles and books on US policy toward North Korea, Thomas Buchanan, "The Coming Decade of Change on the Korean Peninsula: Implications for Northeast Asia and the United States," *East Asia* (Winter 1999); Victor D. Cha, "The Rationale for 'Enhanced' Engagement of North Korea: After the Perry Policy Review," *Asian Survey* (November–December 1999); Bruce Cumings, "Toward a Comprehensive Settlement of the Korea Problem," *Current History* (December 1999); Chuck Downs, *Over the Line: Dealing with North Korea under the Armistice* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute Press, 1999); Michael J. Finnegan, "The Security Strategy of Unified Korea and the Security Relations of Northeast Asia," *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* (Winter 1999); B. C. Koh, "American Perspectives on Regime Dynamics in North Korea," in Chung-in Moon, ed., *Understanding Regime Dynamics in North Korea: Contending Perspectives and Comparative Implications* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1998); Edward A. Olsen, "U.S. Security Policy and the Two Koreas," *World Affairs* (Spring 2000); Hazel Smith, "Bad, mad, sad or rational actor? Why the 'securitization' paradigm makes for poor policy analysis of North Korea," *International Affairs* (January 2000); Scott Snyder, *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999).

Perry policy review, completed in September 1999, was a watershed moment for US policy toward the region. It served to articulate the aims of US policy far more precisely than before, coordinate the policies of the US, ROK and Japan to an unprecedented degree, and finally, gave American policy toward the North the attention it deserved. However, again as in 1992, no effort was made by Perry to continue his dialogue with Kim Young-nam, either in Pyongyang, Beijing or elsewhere. Rather, the US still awaits the proverbial "reciprocal visit" to Washington, presumably by a lesser-ranked DPRK official.

US policy, admittedly somewhat circumscribed by the election in 1994 of a conservative Republican Congress suspicious of North Korean intentions, simply undertook an incrementalist approach, perhaps assuming the North was unlikely to last long—especially when severe food shortages became apparent in 1995. Probing deeper, there appeared to be an American unwillingness to grant a certain stature to North Korea, which kept engagement at a mid-bureaucratic level. US policy toward the North has been run on a day-to-day basis by the Korea Desk at the State Department, which conducts business with the DPRK United Nations mission in New York (not even a liaison office has yet materialized in either capital as called for in the Agreed Framework). In the occasional major bilateral meetings or four-power talks of recent years, the US has been represented by a well-qualified and hard-working ambassador but whose DPRK counterpart is just one of eight vice foreign ministers. The senior US official currently supervising US policy toward the DPRK is a Counselor to the Secretary of State, who, although undoubtedly a quick learner, has had little diplomatic experience in her career.

According to a former North Korea desk officer, the National Security Council "appears satisfied with 'going with the flow' of daily world events," rather than pursuing initiatives and policy goals. The NSC steers clear of differing agency viewpoints of how to deal with the North, and thus does not establish clear policy priorities and strategies for Northeast Asia.<sup>34</sup> It does not play a sufficiently harmonizing or coordinating role. In many respects, due to a lack of real forward movement in US-DPRK relations since 1995, US

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34 C. Kenneth Quinones, "The Korean Peninsula: Preserve the Past or Move Toward Reconciliation," presented before the Council on Foreign Relations, New York, NY, January 28, 1998, available at <http://www.foreignrelations.org/public/pubs/quinones.html>.



problems with the North have festered. Although the Yongbyon nuclear facility remains frozen, the construction of the light-water reactors by KEDO is now significantly delayed and the North wants compensation for the lost energy production. Although last September the North agreed to temporarily freeze missile testing—the single issue that most transfixes the US (and Japan) today—in exchange for the lifting of selective economic sanctions, the legal provisions affected are not the critical ones that would permit significant US-DPRK trade. Their administrative implementation, as of this writing, has yet to be effectuated. And now, it appears, the North has made the strategic decision to focus on improving relations with South Korea while relegating relations with the US and Japan to the back burner.

Perhaps, particularly after President Kim Dae-jung's March 9 Berlin speech, North Korea has determined that its best chances for economic recovery while preserving its regime lie with the South rather than with the US or Japan. The North may simply be looking elsewhere for support, aware that the US has become onerous to deal with. The time for what some regarded as the North's marginalization of the South (although often aided and abetted by past ROK policy) may be over. For many observers, the inter-Korean summit is a dramatic "seizing of Korean diplomatic initiative after seven years of US-centered diplomacy on the Korean peninsula."<sup>35</sup> Analyst Robert Manning asserts that while the Clinton administration argues that the Perry policy review process of US-DPRK relations made the North-South summit possible, the "more likely explanation is that the summit reflects an alternative or rejection of the policy Perry's effort seeks to initiate."<sup>36</sup> However one looks at it, clearly President Kim Dae-jung's initiative has moved what could arguably be called an ineffective or even failing diplomacy out of Washington into Korea's hands where Koreans themselves may determine their fate.

Kim Jong-il's recent visit to Beijing can be seen as an effort to insure that China will play a prime role in fostering the direct improvement of inter-Korean ties. Kim thus revealed himself as a "leader who has the willingness and capacity to engage in public diplomacy," noted the Asia Foundation's

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35 Robert Manning, "The Korean Summit: A Test of Both Kims," *Korea Times*, May 18, 2000; "Mr. Kim, Meet Mr. Kim. We'll Wait Outside," *Washington Post*, June 4, 2000; "Is N. Korea Changing its attitude?" *Washington Times*, June 8, 2000. Manning is director of Asian studies at the Council on Foreign Relations.

36 *Ibid.*

Scott Snyder.<sup>37</sup> For some analysts, Kim's trip to Beijing has not merely restored China's traditional influence with Pyongyang, but perhaps given it unrivalled leverage over both Koreas. Now it appears that Russian President Putin will visit North Korea in July, evidently prepared to reassert Russian global and regional interests. Putin surely will attempt to influence a down-sizing of North Korea's missile program, thus giving him leverage with the US on NMD; Russia has long advocated expanding the four-power peace talks to include Japan and itself.

Kim Dae-jung's apparent choice of an envoy to the US who emphasizes the growing role Seoul should play in setting the international agenda for dealing with Pyongyang, according to one analysis, "underscores Seoul's insistence on taking the leadership role in setting and implementing a multi-national policy toward North Korea."<sup>38</sup> At least in part, the ambassadorial appointment "appears to be intended to ensure that Seoul is in charge of the unified policy toward Pyongyang [and] will allow him to battle US reluctance at the quick pace toward reconciliation."<sup>39</sup> Obviously, if President Kim hopes to dismantle the Cold War structure on the peninsula in his remaining two and a half years, speed and direction toward reconciliation with the North will be essential.

However, there naturally may arise concern in Washington and Tokyo of too much progress, too quickly toward inter-Korean reconciliation. The concern might be related to the long-term ramifications of potential summit agreements to the perceived interests of the US and Japan, which understandably diverge from those of the two Koreas.<sup>40</sup> Manning reflects US official views when he argues that any agreements by Seoul to build social infrastructure in the North—energy grids, roads, railways and communications, which have obvious military uses—should be linked to progress in threat reduction, missiles, nuclear, and conventional force reductions.<sup>41</sup> The US argument may

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37 Scott Snyder, "Kim Jong Il's 'Coming Out'," *Korea Times*, June 8, 2000. Snyder is the Asia Foundation representative in Seoul.

38 "Seoul's unusual choice," *Global Intelligence Update*, STRATFOR.COM, May 26, 2000, available at <http://www.stratfor.com/services/giu2000/052600.asp>. The apparent designee as incoming ROK ambassador to Washington is Dr. Yang Sung-chul, an expert on North Korea.

39 Ibid.

40 "Inter-Korean summit draws concern," *Global Intelligence Update*, STRATFOR.COM, May 9, 2000, available at <http://www.stratfor.com/services/giu2000/050900.asp>.

be that it is impossible for the ROK to make genuine progress with the North without meaningfully addressing these security concerns. While in principle correct, what is important at this early stage is that the summit happen at all, be considered successful, and lead to additional summits and other inter-Korean dialogue and exchange. All this will contribute to ratcheting down tensions on the peninsula.

The current ROK ambassador to the US, Lee Hong Koo, told a symposium at Georgetown University in May that "there seems to be a difference in focus between Korea and the international community, particularly the United States" in expectations for the June summit. The ROK, he said, was more preoccupied with creating a momentum toward reunifying the divided peninsula, while the US was more concerned with the agenda, especially the issue of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction. But Lee added the actual "meeting itself is an occasion to reinforce deterrence." Personal assessment of Kim Jong-il would be a "tremendous help in mapping out our future strategy."<sup>42</sup>

According to a Blue House official, President Kim Dae-jung believes the inter-Korean summit "should serve as an opportunity to send a 'clear message' to the four superpowers... that South and North Korea can handle their problems on their own." The official noted that the President believes that the "two Koreas should make the summit a success so that it will be clear to the four powers that it is appropriate to leave Korean problems to Koreans.... The two Koreas should play the leading role in Korean affairs, with the four powers providing support and assistance for their efforts."<sup>43</sup>

Being the lone superpower sometimes means knowing when to hold back. At this dawn of a new century, America needs to be patient with and trusting of its longtime ally, and give the leeway for both Koreas to begin what is necessarily a difficult process of trust-building ahead. No previous ROK government has been this bold to risk the kind of diplomacy Seoul has undertaken since 1998. Of course, the US troop presence in the ROK should remain unaffected, and as the fruits of this process unfold, the ways in which America can best contribute to peninsular peace will become self-evident. But

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41 Manning, "The Korean Summit: A Test of Both Kims."

42 Sharon Behn, "S. Korean ambassador, analysts, warn of diverging allied interests in summit," *Agence France-Presse*, May 22, 2000.

43 Shi-yong Chon, "President aims to show Koreas can handle issues independently," *Korea Herald*, June 7, 2000.

at this historical juncture, the need for Seoul to now take the lead in a process that only it is fully competent to implement should be accepted by its American ally. While the US does not pretend to dictate terms of reconciliation, it must recognize that the birth of a genuine peace process begins only between the two Koreas on terms that strictly meet their own needs.<sup>44</sup> American anxiety over the potential security implications of prospective inter-Korean agreements must not lead to undue or reckless interference, or overruling the ROK. That potentially could derail a peace process that the US and Korea have awaited for fifty-five years.<sup>45</sup>

US adaptation to a redefined role in Korea would be a far smaller matter if it were not for the larger context of strategic American policy errors in the 1990s, as discussed earlier. A decade after the end of the Cold War, an America on a less sure moral footing finds its leadership in Asia, Europe and elsewhere questioned and even ridiculed. Yet, nonetheless, upon the occasion of the inter-Korean summit, the four major powers surrounding the peninsula are engaged in a process aimed at formulating a new Northeast Asian order, a necessary process which will reinforce the reconciliation of the two Koreas. As Snyder writes, the "new developments in South and North Korea may be the driving force shaping a new Northeast Asian security environment as Korea's neighbors respond to developments between the two Koreas."<sup>46</sup>

44 For a cogent discussion why reconciliation should be the primary US objective on the Korean peninsula, see William M. Drennan, "The U.S. Role in Korean Reunification," *Korea and World Affairs* (Summer 1998), pp. 174–75.

45 According to one report, the three-way talks between the US, South Korea and Japan held in Tokyo on May 12 were testy. The US envoys allegedly "left the meeting feeling South Korea was not taking [American] concerns as seriously as they wanted." Sangwon Suh and Laxmi Nakarmi, "Korea: Preparing to Meet," *Asiaweek*, June 9, 2000. At their brief meeting on June 8 at the memorial service for the late Japanese prime minister Obuchi, President Clinton told President Kim Dae-jung that he was "in complete accord" with his South Korean counterpart. But one report noted that Clinton said "there should be limits to assistance provided [to North Korea] if missile and nuclear issues are not settled." Min-bai Kim, "Clinton Urges to Address Nuclear, Missile Issues at Summit," *Chosun Ilbo*, June 8, 2000. Another variance in the stances of the US and ROK should also be noted. Although the ROK announced its support in May for DPRK membership in the Asian Development Bank, the US opposed it. Edwin Truman, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury for International Affairs, told a news conference at the Bank's annual meeting in Thailand, "North Korea is an international terrorist state. As long as this situation prevails, we will oppose North Korean membership." "Piggy in the Middle," *Korea Now*, May 20, 2000.

Korea's nascent peace process needs nurturing above all by the United States, no one can afford for it to be stillborn. After a successful summit, we will indeed be closer to a durable peace than the Korean peninsula has seen in over fifty years. As one editorial commented:

We would all do well to follow Kim Dae Jung's example. . . . He used a mix of patience, persistence, Christian compassion, and Confucian sincerity. All the while he avoided using the threatening Cold War rhetoric of deterrence. Hopefully, Washington will listen and learn from the summit.<sup>47</sup>

The US must exercise the wisdom to know that new historical circumstances in Northeast Asia demand it permit a natural evolution of roles and responsibilities in the creation of a permanent peace. It is a wisdom that should emanate from the depths of America's Judeo-Christian tradition, the source of its greatness.

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46 Snyder, "Kim Jong Il's 'Coming Out'."

47 "A Message for Washington?" *Joongang Ilbo*, May 24, 2000, editorial.