

What Went Wrong?

The Bush administration's failed North Korea policy

BY NICHOLAS EBERSTADT

Of all the disappointments for which the George W. Bush administration will be remembered, perhaps none is as bitter as the failure of its North Korea policy. Despite its intermittent tough talk about Kim Jong Il and his regime, the Bush team's record with Pyongyang these past eight years is a nearly unbroken string of defeats and retreats.

At the end of the Bush era North Korea's nuclear arsenal is bigger and more deadly than ever before. On the Bush watch, North Korea not only publicly declared itself to be a nuclear power, but set off a device to prove it. No less dismaying, there are fewer genuine constraints against further North Korean nuclear proliferation in place today than at Bush's first inauguration. The Bush administration, moreover, has failed abjectly in its intent of loosening Kim Jong Il's monster grip on his slave-state. Despite the speechifying about "the Axis of Evil" and "Freedom on the March," the real existing North Korean system remains as savagely repressive and defiantly unreformed as ever.

So what went wrong? In and around Washington these days, the Bush administration's North Korea policy has spawned considerable off-the-record discussion about "lessons to be learned," much of it from circles close to the incoming Obama administration.

In the Obama camp's recounting, three purported Bush

administration mistakes are always highlighted: (1) Dubya's ideological and narrowly moralistic view of North Korea, in contrast to what is seen as the Clinton administration's more pragmatic and nuanced "engagement"; (2) the Bush crew's supposed aversion to negotiation with distasteful adversaries; and (3) an alleged Team Bush failure to understand the potential for major breakthroughs on contentious questions through "high level dialogue," that is to say,

face-to-face meetings of top leadership (possibly even, as the president-elect himself at times has said, without "preconditions").

This Obama camp critique offers strong clues as to what we may expect in the way of North Korea policy from the incoming administration. But as a diagnosis of what actually went awry in Washington's dealings with Pyongyang during the Bush years, such an analysis is sorely lacking. It is both superficial and inaccurate. Unless the new administration's North Korea team starts with a clear-eyed recognition of the fundamental reasons that Bush's North Korea

policy failed, it risks repeating Bush's same mistakes—and perhaps committing even graver errors on its own watch.

Let us examine each of the particulars of the Obama camp's critique in turn.

Despite assiduous efforts to rewrite history (not least by some of Obama's own prospective appointees), the Clinton years were not exactly a Golden Age of U.S.-North Korea relations. The architects of the Clinton "engagement" with Pyongyang indulged in willful self-deception (and also some collateral deception of the American public) on the North Korean nuclear question.

Late in the second Clinton term, at the very moment



A portrait of Dear Leader, Kim Jong Il

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when elated senior officials in Washington were celebrating their impending diplomatic “breakthrough” with North Korea on nukes and other troublesome issues, the country was in fact secretly racing to build an illicit uranium-based weapons program in contravention of its diverse nonproliferation commitments and pledges to Washington and to the international community.

The details of these violations are now largely public—and much of the information derives from sources who could hardly be considered agents of American intelligence (including the so-called “father of the Islamic Bomb,” Dr. A.Q. Khan of Pakistan). Clinton’s “engagement hawks” chose to ignore the mounting evidence that North Korea was cheating. They preferred instead to believe a tale of their own making, namely that “high level meetings” with Kim Jong Il (such as the audiences which Secretary of State Albright was awarded in Pyongyang in October 2000) were about to open up new vistas in relations between the two countries.

That illusion of progress could only be maintained as long as American officials averted their eyes from unpleasant facts. Sure enough: The current and ongoing “North Korean nuclear crisis”—the one that erupted in 2002—was set in motion when Bush administration officials finally confronted their North Korean counterparts with proof that they had been caught cheating.

The acts of self-deception that marred “engagement” with North Korea during Clinton’s first term, incidentally, may have been less spectacular, but they were no less consequential. Chief among these was the Clinton team’s 1994 “Agreed Framework,” a document signed by emissaries from both Washington and Pyongyang. That “Framework” was officially hailed at the time as a major diplomatic achievement, and vaunted ever after by Clinton envoys as a roadmap for North Korean “denuclearization.” The fine print of that “Framework,” unfortunately, indicated instead that America would, eventually, be providing North Korea with *nuclear power plants*. Indeed, the text stipulated there would be a couple of “light water reactors” for Pyongyang in the deal.

In effect, the Clinton administration’s plan for resolving

the original “North Korean nuclear crisis” of 1992-94 was to promise Pyongyang a supply of even more fissile material. While some proponents of the “Framework” implied that the envisioned reactors would be “safe” because they would produce non-weapons-grade plutonium, the plain truth is that there is no such thing as “safe” plutonium. (Nagasaki, after all, was incinerated by an atomic bomb from similarly “safe” plutonium.) The “Agreed Framework” finally fell apart in 2002, repudiated by Pyongyang at the outset of the current North Korean nuclear crisis, but its fateful precedent—U.S. acquiescence in, and support for, a “peaceful” nuclear development program for North Korea under the Kim Jong Il regime—haunts us to this day.

So much for Clinton-era “engagement.” What about the potential of diplomatic breakthroughs via “high level meetings” with Kim Jong Il?

Contrary to perceptions apparently prevailing in some wings of the Obama camp, “high level meetings” with the Dear Leader have in fact *already* taken place—repeatedly. Over the past decade, Kim Jong Il has parlayed directly with an American secretary of state, a Japanese prime minister, and two successive presidents of South Korea. Two of these summits took place in the Clinton years, two in the Bush era. But none of them yielded any appreciable diplomatic results—for the outsiders.

Kim Jong Il lied to Madeline Albright about North Korea’s nukes and missiles in 2000; he lied to Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi about North Korea’s Japanese abductees in 2002. He humiliated South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun at their 2006 Pyongyang summit—the negligible results of that top-level get-together are one reason why most American readers have never even heard of the meeting.

Admittedly, the sensational Pyongyang summit held between Roh’s predecessor Kim Dae Jung and the Dear Leader in June 2000 (for which the South Korean won the Nobel Peace Prize) did look like a true “high-level breakthrough” at first—but the spectacle was later discredited as a cash-for-photo-ops transaction. It turned out that Kim Jong Il only invited the South Korean president to the North after a secret promise was made to reward the Dear Leader



Kim Jong Il relaxing with supporters

with hundreds of millions of dollars in South Korean taxpayer funds for the visit, a fraud for which the Nobel Laureate ultimately had to apologize on national television, and for which several of his aides were subsequently sentenced to prison by South Korean courts. (Some high-level meetings with Kim Jong Il, to be sure, *have* produced significant agreements. At a Moscow summit with Vladimir Putin in 2001, Kim and Putin both backed the proposition that “the pullout of U.S. forces from South Korea is a pressing issue which brooks no delay”—a breakthrough of sorts, perhaps, but not exactly a turnaround in Pyongyang’s position on that issue.)

Kim Jong Il’s track record in “high level meetings” with foreign leaders is absolutely unambiguous: Like his father



A toast! Kim Jong Il and Madeleine Albright in October 2000

before him, the Dear Leader always uses these occasions to press for advantage and to pursue preexisting objectives set for the North Korean state. There is nothing surprising about this: The only surprise is why anyone might expect him to behave differently. The notion that Kim Jong Il might forget to do all this (much less reverse nearly three decades of his own relentless military and nuclear policy) if only he were, at last, within intoxicating personal proximity of a real American president is worse than fanciful. It is profoundly condescending.

Finally, let us consider the charge that the Bush administration’s North Korea policy failed for want of diplomatic activity. It is true that United States and North Korean envoys had relatively little contact for the first year and a half or so of Bush’s tenure: a diplomatic hiatus due in part to the incoming Bush administration’s prolonged “policy review” on North Korea, and thereafter to Pyongyang’s explicit refusal to meet with Bush officials for many months on end. Since then, however, the sheer volume of U.S. negotiating and conferencing with North Korea has been immense—

very possibly outweighing, by purely quantitative measures, the Clinton era’s corresponding diplomatic initiatives with North Korea.

For the past five and a half years, the United States and North Korea (along with China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea) have been entwined in a multilateral “Six Party” process on North Korean denuclearization. These exhaustive deliberations and their side-meetings have resulted in untold thousands of hours of official face-to-face contact, and in at least two agreements signed by all six governments (including one that the State Department formally refers to as a “North Korea-Denuclearization Action Plan”).

The Bush administration, in short, can hardly be faulted for a lack of conferencing with North Korea. During the last two years of the Bush tenure, indeed, the administration’s envoys have been almost endlessly engaged in such busywork. The problem, instead, is that these protracted “denuclearization talks” did not produce anything in North Korea remotely resembling denuclearization.

Just the opposite. With each new round of this diplomatic process, North Korea’s status as a nuclear weapon state became a little more undeniable, while international constraints on Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions looked correspondingly less credible. With the final round of Bush-era Six Party Talks, which collapsed in Beijing just last month over the issue of a “verification protocol”—that is, whether Pyongyang would submit to outside validation of its claims about its own nuclear activities—North Korea had in effect managed to rewrite or redefine nearly all the international nonproliferation strictures it had faced at the start of the Bush presidency.

Such an achievement arguably qualifies as a diplomatic triumph—but only a triumph for Kim Jong Il and his minions.

If the Team Obama critique is unpersuasive, how then did the Bush administration’s North Korea policy come undone?

The trouble was not a lack of summitry, a shortage of negotiations, or a want of Clinton-style “engagement.” Nor was the problem the president’s purportedly narrow and ideological view of the Kim Jong Il regime. In retrospect, George W. Bush’s unapologetically harsh pronouncements about the North Korean state’s nature, its intentions, and its trustworthiness look decidedly *more* realistic than the corresponding assessments of the “North Korea hands” from the previous Clinton administration.

No, the problem was not the Bush attitudes toward

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the Kim Jong Il regime, unfavorable as they were. It was rather that the president and his administration never actually developed a *policy* toward North Korea—an approach through which those attitudes toward this dangerous regime would be operationalized, and objectives coherently pursued. From beginning to end, Washington’s failures on the North Korea front these past eight years can largely be ascribed to the unfortunate fact that the Bush administration couldn’t settle on a strategy for dealing with Pyongyang.

For an administration so often criticized for an overbearing (and undeserved) confidence in its own strategies, the charge that the Bush administration lacked a strategy altogether in dealing with one of its most serious adversaries may sound curious. Incoming Bush officials were scathing—both in private and public—about what they held to be the Clinton administration’s hapless mismanagement of North Korea policy. And such disdainful criticisms of their predecessors’ policies strongly suggested, at the very least, that they had an alternative policy of their own.

In the event, the Bush team’s low regard for Clinton administration performance was not ultimately based in fundamental disagreements about contending North Korea strategies. The Bush team’s initial, and not-so-secret, mantra on North Korea was “Anything But Clinton.” “ABC” was something that all members of the Bush North Korea team could agree upon. But it could not provide any guidance on what actually to do—or how to make their big North Korea problem into a smaller one.

In retrospect, the hints that the Bush administration lacked a North Korea strategy were always there, even from the beginning. The strangely protracted and seemingly inconclusive “North Korea policy review” at the start of Bush’s tenure was one of these. In June 2002—nearly a year and a half into his first term—George W. Bush’s deputy secretary of state, Richard Armitage, declared that “Once we have made up our minds” about North Korea policy “we will of course go to our South Korean and Japanese friends”—revealing that the search for a North Korea strategy was still a work in progress. More than two years later, in October 2004, Secretary of State Colin Powell practically spelled it all out on CNN: In a memorable response to an interviewer’s question, he reassured his audience that “We [the Bush administration] don’t have any red lines” in dealing with North Korea. If you don’t have a policy—or a strategy—you won’t have “red lines,” either.

Thus paradoxically, despite his hard-line reputation and his openly hostile posture toward Kim Jong Il, President Bush and his advisers actually lacked a game plan for reducing the threats that Pyongyang posed to America and her allies. Consequently, notwithstanding its unabashedly negative view of the Dear Leader and his government, the administration’s approach to North Korea was unmoored

from the very start. Disconnected from any guiding vision, America’s “policy” on North Korea stumbled from one blunder to the next.

When an international actor walks onto the world stage without a policy or a strategy, he is both more likely to acquit himself poorly in the face of surprise, and more likely to be surprised in the first place. In contrast to their North Korean counterparts, who are reputed to “game out” responses to their international opponents’ every possible move, the Bush team found itself constantly being caught unawares by North Korean gambits and not knowing how to react.

The administration, for example, gained a significant tactical advantage over Pyongyang in late 2002 when it unexpectedly demonstrated that it had caught North Korea cheating on its nuclear pledges with a covert uranium program—but then was thrown for a complete loss when North Korea upped the ante by removing the international safeguards on its plutonium program, announcing its withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and restarting its Yongbyon plutonium reactor. The eventual U.S. countermove—a call in 2003 for the multilateral denuclearization negotiations ultimately known as the Six Party Talks—was an improvisation bereft of clear objectives or thought-through means for achieving them, as was to become clear.

The stunning and pervasive failure of Bush-era diplomacy to reduce the North Korean threat or advance American interests entailed more than just the failure of the Six Party Talks—it also involved a host of missed opportunities or plain missteps in America’s bilateral relations. China and South Korea—Kim Jong Il’s two main financial backers at the start of the Bush administration—may not have shared the administration’s sentiments or priorities regarding North Korea, but those facts in and of themselves did not mean that drawing those two governments toward policies more to America’s liking was a diplomatic mission impossible. (This, after all, is the ordinary terrain on which competent diplomats the world over are forced to operate.) Given China’s exposure to risks emanating from North Korea—including risks to its domestic political, economic, and social situations—Americans certainly had a brief for arguing that broad cooperation with Washington on the North Korean question, while obviously unappetizing to Beijing, would be less unpleasant than some of the potential alternatives.

As for South Korea’s “sunshine era” governments—which at times seemed more suspicious of the U.S. forces protecting them than of the North Korean forces committed to destroying them—these presided over closely divided electorates in open societies, meaning that there was always scope for Washington to cultivate coalitions with domestic

South Korea constituencies to build pressure for an issue-by-issue approach toward North Korea more to America's liking. The United States never attempted anything like this, preferring instead to sulk until the South Korean electorate finally brought "regime change" to their country. (As fate would have it, the Bush North Korea team no longer really wanted a non-sunshine president by the time it finally got one in 2007.) Neglecting the potential of bilateral diplomacy, of course, is all that much more likely when one does not have a strategy to connect the dots.

Despite the tremendous distraction and diversion of resources imposed by the course of military events in Iraq, the United States possessed (and possesses still) a vast array of international instruments for countering North Korea's nuclear provocations: instruments, one should perhaps emphasize, well short of war. Put another way: To a leadership informed by a strategic vision, conference diplomacy with Pyongyang would be just one of many options in the portfolio for reducing the threat posed by North Korea.

In the absence of a coherent policy, though, the imperative of "success" in talks with North Korea suddenly took on a life of its own for the Bush team. (After all, there was no alternative strategy, no "plan B," for what to do if the talks came to an unsuccessful end.) Consequently, instead of crafting our conference diplomacy with Pyongyang in accordance with our overall strategy for North Korean threat reduction, our efforts at North Korean threat reduction came to be tailored to the perceived needs of our conference diplomacy.

Thus our Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)—a promising international effort to interdict the illicit commerce of North Korea and other peddlers of weapons of mass destruction—was allowed to fade into obscurity when its very success was deemed to pose risks to the "continued progress" of the talks with North Korea. (Have you heard about PSI over the past two years? Neither has anyone else.)

Then there was the "Banco Delta Asia" affair. Pyongyang depends on counterfeiting, drug-running, and other such sources of income to prop up its shaky state finances. Thanks to careful and persistent interagency detective work, American officials began to track these down in the Bush years. When this work prompted Macau's Banco Delta Asia to freeze over \$20 million in suspect North Korean assets, North Korean officials howled—and warned they would not return to the nuclear bargaining table until they got their bag-money back. The strategically inclined would have realized we had found a pressure point—and would have squeezed all the harder, to extract concessions. But our State Department envoys fought tooth and nail against our

Treasury officials to free their negotiating partners from this economic chokehold—and with the president's backing (and the skirting of a few laws) saw to it that the loot was fully returned to Pyongyang's discomfited gangsters.

In a universe where policymakers were alert to the connection between real world events, officials might have realized that the North Korean regime's practiced abuse of its subjects at home was the flipside of its methodical menace of foreign populations through weapons of mass destruction and that human rights must be an active front in the overall fight for North Korean threat reduction. In the atomized worldview of the Bush administration's North Korea team, however, human rights in North Korea was routinely treated as an irrelevant annoyance or worse—even though the president himself had spoken passionately about the cause.

Thus Christopher Hill, the point man on negotiations with North Korea in the second George W. Bush administration, would demur in December 2008 that "each country, including our own, needs to improve its human rights record." And when the president's own envoy on human rights in North Korea suggested last January that human rights be included as a consideration in our Pyongyang deal-brokering, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice would sharply declare, "He doesn't know what's going on in the Six Party Talks."

Adrift without a strategic compass, Bush's North Korea team ended up clinging like shipwreck victims to the desperate prospects of their negotiating sessions with North Korean officials, sacrificing substance so that the process might continue. In the name of keeping the talks going, they would embrace vague joint agreements with loopholes big enough for a covert uranium enrichment program to slip through; politely refrain from demanding accounts of Pyongyang's nuclear proliferation with governments like Syria; and exhibit bizarre forbearance in the face of North Korea's provocations. U.S. diplomats had worked strenuously to pass U.N. Security Council Resolution 1718 in 2006—a condemnation of North Korea's nuclear test, replete with economic sanctions—but Bush's North Korea team was perfectly willing to undercut this international effort to penalize the North Korean regime if "progress in the talks" so demanded. Last October, in the hope of luring North Korea back to the Six Party table yet again, North Korea was removed from the roster of countries subject to U.S. "Terrorism List" sanctions.

Ironically, as the Six Party Talks lurched on, the United States seemed to become a more dangerous and unpredictable actor, at least for America's own allies and partners. Cooperating with Washington on tracking down North Korean illicit finances, for example, meant being left unexpectedly out on a limb when Washington suddenly reversed

course and started undoing its own economic pressure campaign. Even worse, indicating willingness to cooperate closely with Washington in the Six Party Talks would come to expose allies to the risk and indignity of being slapped down on issues critical to their own national interest (as happened last year, when Washington stiff-armed Tokyo on the question of Japanese abductees in North Korea).

The longer the Six Party Talks progressed, the further the American negotiating team seemed to be separated from its initial goals and objectives. Gone today is any talk of a “complete, verifiable and irreversible disarmament” for North Korea. Gone, too, is any serious talk of a “complete and correct” North Korean accounting of that state’s past nuclear activities. Gone is any substantive discussion of a credible and comprehensive international nuclear verification regime on North Korean territory. And gone, of course, is any diplomatic dialogue about North Korea’s secret uranium program—the project that triggered the current round of the North Korean nuclear crisis in the first place. Just about all the Bush administration can point to for its troubles at these talks is a decommissioned cooling tower at the Yongbyon plutonium facility and a ton or so of diversionary North Korean paperwork on the plutonium project. By the most exquisite of ironies, American scientists detected traces of highly enriched uranium on some of that documentation—presumably fallout from an enrichment program that the same paperwork was meant to prove does not exist.

If the Bush North Korea team had had a strategy or policy worthy of the name, these adventures in conferencing would have been terminated years ago—as soon as it became clear they were advancing North Korean rather than American interests. But for lack of any better idea, apparently, the deleterious Six Party diplomacy was allowed to masquerade as the U.S. North Korea policy—and to continue until the final buzzer sounded on the Bush administration.

In 2001, the incoming Bush administration accused its predecessors of “kicking the can down the road,” of fecklessly deferring difficult international problems. With North Korea, the Bush administration leaves town in the indelicate position of having committed the very offenses it pilloried the Clintonistas for—and big time.

America’s strategic position with respect to North Korea is worse today than when Bush first took office. The Obama team inherits a much more serious North Korean nuclear threat than the one Bush faced in early 2001. Moreover, all

of the perverse diplomatic incentives for Pyongyang that Bush aides criticized in the Clinton North Korea policy—bribes for showing up at meetings, no-penalty responses to provocations and violations, and the like—ended up becoming “business as usual” in the Bush era. It will be that much more difficult now for the Obama administration to confront, and unteach, such routine bad behavior by North Korea. To make matters worse, the North Koreans are well aware that they have just faced down the most implacably hostile American president to confront them since Harry S. Truman—and have not only bested him dip-



Christopher Hill: ‘Each country . . . needs to improve its human rights record.’

lomatically, but have practically made him eat his own Bush Doctrine in front of the world. Thanks to the experiences of the past eight years, North Korean leadership will be much more confident and quite possibly bolder in its opening moves against the new and perforce untested Obama administration.

Yet when all is said and done, the outlook for American policy toward a hostile, nuclear North Korea is by no means unremittingly bleak. Viewed plainly, Pyongyang has been dealt a miserable international hand, which it has played exceedingly well. America, conversely, has been dealt a potentially winning hand in this contest. It is just that we have played the hand extraordinarily poorly.

Playing our hand better is both the challenge and the promise for America’s North Korea policy in the years ahead. The Obama administration can capitalize upon the tremendous opportunities inherent in this situation, promoting American interests and international humanitarian objectives at one and the same time. Seizing these opportunities, however, will require the Obama team to discard the myths of the Clinton era, and to recognize the failures of the Bush era for what they really were. ♦