

The U.S.'s Deterrence and Assurance Strategies towards North Korea in the 1990s

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Abstract

In the early 1990s, tensions loomed large on the Korean Peninsula unlike the disintegration of the global confrontations and the movements to open the former Soviet socialist world brought about by the post-Cold War conflict structure. Despite the signing of the Inter-Korean Basic Agreement in 1991, the North Korean nuclear issue that emerged drove the Korean Peninsula into a crisis, and its resolution through the US-DPRK Geneva Agreement also failed to produce ultimate results. This study explores the reasons behind the strategy of assurance pursued by Washington failed under such circumstances. In particular, this research examines the aspects of both assurance and deterrence of Washington's policy toward Pyongyang. Shedding new lights

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on assurance as an imperative part of successful deterrence, this study aims to provide policy implications for future policy toward North Korea.

Keywords: Post-Cold War, The 1991 Basic Agreement, The 1994 Geneva Framework, Deterrence, Assurance.

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I. Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea was compelled to find a new survival strategy as its allies, the Soviet Union and China, suspended their political and economic support to North Korea. Standing at a critical crossroads, the Kim family believed developing North Korea's nuclear capability was the only way to ensure the regime's survival. North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and rejected the inspection conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of its nuclear facilities. Thus, Pyongyang's move triggered the first nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

To resolve the crisis, Washington tried to address the crisis by making assurances to Pyongyang. In the 1994 Agreed Framework, the U.S. committed to providing energy assistance to North Korea and promoting the normalization of bilateral relations. However, the destructive power and horror of nuclear weapons have become the most credible assurance measurement for the Kim family, which is facing significant threats to their lives. North Korea's ambition to become a powerful nuclear state is inextricably linked to the regime's survival. This had fundamentally driven North Korea to choose "maintaining the regime through nuclear weapons development" rather than "peace on the Korean Peninsula through reform and opening."

In addition, the United States' domestic and foreign situations and strategies made it difficult to provide sustainable assurance to North Korea. Although the United States tried to assure North Korea to discourage its nuclear development, U.S. policy toward North Korea in the early 1990s was focused on "deterrence" that dissuaded North Korea from provocations and nuclear weapons development.¹

Current inter-Korean relations are more fraught with conflicts than in the early 1990s. Unlike the heightened détente in the international environment right after the Cold War ended, it is more difficult to elicit global cooperation on the issue of the Korean Peninsula amid intensifying U.S.-China competition for hegemony. Moreover, North Korea has already conducted its sixth nuclear test and is unveiling itself as a "nuclear state" both domestically and internally. Nevertheless, the progress in inter-Korean relations during the post-Cold War period and the conclusion of the US-DPRK Geneva Agreement have significant implications. This study discusses the implications for future North Korean policy by examining the discordance between the deterrence and assurance strategies against North Korea amid the

¹ Robert S. Litwak. *Rogue States and U.S. Foreign Policy: Containment after the Cold War*. Washington, D.C. : Baltimore, (2000); Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig. *North Korea through the Looking Glass*. Brookings Institution Press, (2000); Curtis H. Martin. "Lessons of the Agreed Framework for Using Engagement as a Nonproliferation Tool," *The Nonproliferation Review* 6, no. 4 (December 1999): 35–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736709908436777>.

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threat by its regime after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of socialism in Eastern Europe.

The remaining sections of the paper are organized as follows. The next section discusses the concepts relevant to the relationship between “deterrence” and “assurance,” as well as how these concepts apply to the case of the first nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. The following section explores the security environment in the Asia-Pacific region after the end of the Cold War, and the motivation for the North Korean nuclear development. The Subsequent section explores the U.S. assurance of North Korea to resolve the first nuclear crisis and the reasons behind the failure of the assurances. Finally, the paper concludes with policy implications to help policymakers accelerate the promotion of denuclearization in the Korean Peninsula.

II. Deterrence and Assurance Approaches to the North Korea Issue

This study explores the reasons behind Washington’s failure to discourage Pyongyang’s denuclearization. The existing research argues that the strategic environment in Northeast Asia is the primary reason behind North Korea’s nuclear development. In this respect, nuclear development helps ensure the Pyongyang regime’s survival. Kim’s family believes that the development of nuclear capabilities enhances North Korea’s ability to prevent possible attacks from the U.S. and withstand the pressure of

diplomatic isolation.² Other than the changing strategic environment, existing research argues that North Korea's ideological factor plays an essential role in its nuclear development. In North Korea's case, Pyongyang assumes that the country is located in an antagonistic world, and developing nuclear capabilities is the only way to ensure its regime's survival and independence without great powers' interference.³

Although it is true that North Korea's insistence on developing nuclear capabilities generates a security dilemma in Northeast Asia, prior research overlooks the importance of devising tailored and appropriate assurance to encourage North Korea's policy change. During the 1990s, Washington offered assurance and reward to North Korea. More specifically, Washington is committed to provide energy assistance and reinstate the normalization process to discourage North Korea's nuclear development by the conclusion of the 1994 Agreed

² Jihwan Hwang. "Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy toward North Korea: The Clinton and Bush Administrations in Comparative Perspective," *World Affairs* 167, no. 1 (2004): 15–29. <https://doi.org/10.3200/WAFS.167.1.15-29>; Jungsup Kim. "The Security Dilemma: Nuclear and Missile Crisis on the Korean Peninsula," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 18, no. 3 (2006): 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270609464113>; Man Fung Yeung. "North Korea Situates in the Hostile Area: Kim Jong-Un's Survival Tactics between China and the United States," *Tamkang Journal of International Affairs* 24, no. 4 (2020): 99–138. [https://doi.org/10.6185/TJIA.V.202010_24\(2\).0003](https://doi.org/10.6185/TJIA.V.202010_24(2).0003).

³ Jina Kim, *The North Korean Nuclear Weapons Crisis: The Nuclear Taboo Revisited*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, (2014).

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Framework.⁴ However, due to the lack of tailored and credible assurance to North Korea, it has become difficult to achieve denuclearization and peace on the Korean peninsula. Prior to justifying this argument, it is necessary to discuss the concepts of “deterrence” and “assurance.”

“Deterrence” refers to a situation where a state (hereafter “deterrer”) attempts to prevent its target(s) from taking unwanted actions such as military operations by sending threats or implementing some negative measures. With these measures, a deterrer attempts to send a signal to its target that the cost of committing certain actions outweighs the benefit. The deterrer tries to adopt forceful actions in order to preclude the target’s non-compliance. For instance, a deterrer gestures that it is ready to launch a military strike against its target. A deterrer can also

⁴ Christopher Lawrence. “Normalization by Other Means: Technological Infrastructure and Political Commitment in the North Korean Nuclear Crisis,” *International Security* 45, no. 1 (2020): 9–50.
https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00385.

adopt non-military measures, such as economic sanctions⁵ and diplomatic boycotts, to generate pressure against its target.

By implementing the deterrence strategy, the deterrer aims to pressure the target state to reconsider the costs if it continues to commit unfavorable behavior.⁶ However, if a deterrer has sufficient credibility, the target is likely to refrain its target from engaging in unwanted behavior. In other words, a deterrent could be effective if the target believes the deterrer has a reputation for materializing its threat.⁷ Moreover, perception is another factor affecting the target's response to the deterrer. In fact, the target's

⁵ Economic sanctions refer to a state (a sanctioner) trying to disrupt its target(s) economic development to achieve its policy goals. Usually, goals are very dependent on the interaction between the sanctioner and the target. For instance, the sanctioner enforces economic sanctions to constrain its target from engaging in unwanted behavior and to produce diplomatic pressure against its target. In the case of economic sanctions against North Korea, the United States (along with South Korea and the United Nations) attempts to prevent North Korea from obtaining the necessary resources to develop its nuclear capabilities and proliferate its nuclear weapons abroad. In addition, economic sanctions are one of the policy options to constrain North Korea's provocations. Reference: Francesco Giumelli. "The Purposes of Targeted Sanctions," in *Targeted Sanctions: The Impacts and Effectiveness of United Nations Action*, Thomas J. Biersteker, Sue E. Eckert, Marcos Tourinho, eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2016): 38–59; Jonathan Kirshner. "The Microfoundations of Economic Sanctions," *Security Studies* 6, no. 3 (March 1, 1997): 32–64; David Baldwin. *Economic Statecraft*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, (2020); Man Fung Yeung. "The Role of Economic Sanctions in Promoting North Korea's Denuclearization Revisited," *North Korean Review* 19, no. 1 (2023): 57–79. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27217096>.

⁶ Glenn Herald Snyder. *Deterrence and Defense*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, (2016).

⁷ Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke. "Deterrence and Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 41 no. 2 (1989): 170–82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2010406>.

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perception of the deterrer is based upon their past interactions with and judgment of the deterrer. In this case, Robert Jervis argued that a deterrer's image produces a "self-deterrence" effect for its target. In other words, the target's overestimation of the deterrent's ability to carry out a threat also produces a deterrent effect.⁸

Although deterrence helps the deterrer exert pressure on its target, the deterrer cannot guarantee that the strategy will preclude the targets from adopting unwanted actions. First, there is a possibility that the target state might neglect the cost of non-compliance, resulting in the deterrer failing to deter its target. Moreover, the target may be more resistant to the deterrer. In this case, the deterrer may fail to curtail the unwanted behavior of the target, which exacerbates security dilemmas. Under these circumstances, the deterrent strategy might be counterproductive in refraining the target's unwanted behavior.

To counter this problem, if a deterrer wants to prevent its target from engaging and avoid escalating the security dilemma, it adopts the strategy of assurance for its target. In addition to ensuring an ally's loyalty within an alliance, assurance also discourages the adversary from engaging in unwanted actions. Shelling argues that though assurance does not undermine deterrence, the strategy helps to guarantee and support the

⁸ Robert Jervis. "Deterrence and Perception," *International Security* 7, no. 3 (1982): 3–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538549>.

consistency of deterrence: “a strategy or pledge that deterring adversaries’ action by imposing costs, it automatically and logically entails a promise not to impose a cost if they refrain themselves from doing aggressive action.”⁹ Usually, a deterrer attempts to provide security guarantees by not launching attacks or overthrowing the regime of its target. In addition, the deterrer offers rewards to promote the policy change in its target.¹⁰ Furthermore, there is a proactive approach to prevent the target from committing an unwanted behavior, which is called *the Graduated and Reciprocated Initiatives in Tension-reduction*. Under this initiative, a state promotes trust and confidence in its target and adversary by making certain statements and proposals to emphasize its willingness to alleviate the tension in their relationships.¹¹ However, making statements and proposals alone is not sufficient to promote trust between both sides. Instead, the behavior of the state must be aligned with its assurances and

⁹ Thomas C. Schelling. *Arms and Influence*. New Haven: Yale University Press, (1966).

¹⁰ Similar to the concept of coercive diplomacy, a state needs to offer certain rewards to encourage its target’s policy change. Reference: Alexander L. George. *Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*. Boulder CO: Westview Press, (1971); Bruce W. Jentleson and Christopher A. Whytock. “Who ‘Won’ Libya? The Force-Diplomacy Debate and Its Implications for Theory and Policy,” *International Security* 30, no. 3 (2006): 47–86. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2005.30.3.47>.

¹¹ Charles E. Osgood. *An Alternative to War or Surrender*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, (1962); Svenn Lindskold. “Trust Development, the GRIT Proposal, and the Effects of Conciliatory Acts on Conflict and Cooperation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 85, no. 4 (1978): 772–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.85.4.772>.

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should be verifiable. Otherwise, the target disregards the deterrent's assurance.

Other than deterrence, assurance is another policy measure that promotes nuclear non-proliferation. It can be both negative and positive. Negative assurance refers to the promise of nuclear states that they will not use nuclear weapons to impose threats or launch attacks on non-nuclear states.¹² In the meantime, positive assurance is more active in discouraging non-nuclear states from developing nuclear weapons as member of the Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) provide security guarantees and a nuclear umbrella to non-nuclear states to deter their adversaries. In an ideal scenario, members of the NPT establish a formal alliance with non-nuclear powers to ensure the security of the latter.¹³ In other words, positive assurance attempts to reduce the need for non-nuclear states to develop their nuclear capabilities.

Applying the concepts of “deterrence” and “assurance” helps explore the outcome of the interactions between Pyongyang and Washington (along with Seoul) during the 1990s. After the Cold War, the United States launched several initiatives to promote nuclear non-proliferation and ensure security in the Asia-Pacific region in order to accommodate changes in the strategic environment and reduce the security dilemma. Against this

¹² Jeffrey W. Knopf. “Varieties of Assurance,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012): 375–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.643567>.

¹³ Knopf, “Varieties of Assurance.”

background, Washington offered negative assurance to reduce Pyongyang's sense of insecurity after the Cold War. For instance, in response to the first nuclear crisis from 1993 to 1994, Washington tried to provide energy assistance and promised to expedite the process of the U.S.-DPRK diplomatic normalization to discourage North Korea's nuclear development. Seoul also attempted to engage with its counterpart to reduce the possibility of the latter's provocations and assure Pyongyang by withdrawing nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea and facilitating inter-Korean interaction at the social level to promote trust with North Korea.

However, North Korea suspects that Washington's assurances are one of the tools used to demise Kim's regime or promote inter-Korean unification through absorption. To ensure the survival of Pyongyang's regime, North Korea refused to open its economy like China, Vietnam, or other Soviet bloc countries did. Instead, North Korea insisted on developing its nuclear capabilities, which resulted in the first nuclear crisis¹⁴ during which it developed its nuclear capabilities to counter threats from the outside. Although the United States offered assurances to discourage North Korea's nuclear development, to what extent high-cost security guarantees must be provided to induce

¹⁴ Kimberly Ann Elliott. "Will Economic Sanctions Work against North Korea," in *Peace and Security in Northeast Asia: The Nuclear Issue and the Korean Peninsula*, Young Whan Kihl, Peter Hayes, eds. New York: Routledge, (1999): 99–111.

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denuclearization was not clear. As Washington was unaware of whether North Korea intended to change the status quo in its favor, its policymakers doubted the feasibility of offering assurance to North Korea. Highlighting the ineffectiveness of the exchange formula between its security guarantees and denuclearization, Washington believed that North Korea's real intention is to reorganize the international order in the Korean Peninsula and East Asia in a way that is more favorable to the North-led unification through offensive tactics disguised in "security guarantee".¹⁵ However, these arguments result in strengthening deterrence through military power, thereby making the failure of Washington's assurance to Pyongyang.

This study argues that the failure of Washington's assurance of North Korea during the first nuclear crisis can be attributed to the following reasons: (1) North Korea's nuclear motivation for regime survival and; (2) Washington's capricious attitude toward sending assurance signals to the DPRK as its focus has been more on a deterrence strategy. Under these circumstances, Pyongyang believes that retaining its nuclear capability is the only way to ensure its regime's survival and overcome the diplomatic pressure it suffered after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. To examine further why Washington's policy was focused on deterrence in the early 1990s, this study will analyze Washington's

¹⁵ Jina Kim. "An Endless Game: North Korea's Psychological Warfare," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, 17, no. 2 (2005): 153-181.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270509464088>.

Asia Pacific policy after the Cold War. In its global and regional security policy and strategy, the Korean issue was covered only as a side Chapter. As the main goal of Washington was only to maintain stability and the status quo by deterring North Korea's provocation, its assurance policy to lead Pyongyang's behavioral change failed.

III. Washington's Security Policy Adjustment after the Cold War and the North Korean Issue

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the confrontation between the liberal and Communist campaigns no longer exists. Although Washington has enjoyed the leadership of the international order, nascent challenges such as the proliferation of nuclear weaponry, terrorism, regional conflict, and transnational crimes produced difficulty for Washington to ensure its position within the international order.¹⁶

In the Asia-Pacific region, the disintegration of the Soviet reduced the necessity for Washington to deploy large-scale military forces to ensure its presence in the region. Nonetheless, the United States needed to address regional issues such as North Korea's military threat and China's power acceleration. In this

¹⁶ Richard Haass. *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order*. New York, New York: Penguin Press, (2017); John J. Mearsheimer. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven London, (2018); Stephen M. Walt. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*, Illustrated edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, (2018).

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respect, Washington adjusted its Asia-Pacific policy to adapt to the new strategic environment within the region. Other than engaging with China to include Beijing in the U.S.-led liberal order, the U.S. sought to avoid the risk of unnecessary involvement and save the budget by withdrawing unnecessary military forces.¹⁷

On the Korean Peninsula, the United States planned to reduce the military deployment within South Korean territory. Washington's newly adjusted policy on the Korean peninsula followed three stages. During the first stage, the U.S. planned to reduce the number of American military personnel stationed in South Korea from 135,000 to approximately 14,000-15,000. In the second stage, it re-examined the seriousness of the North Korean threat to adjust the degree of its power projections in South Korea. Meanwhile, the U.S. tried to enhance South Korea's capabilities to defend against North Korea's threat. At the final stage, Washington expected that Seoul could play a major role in ensuring the security of the Korean Peninsula.¹⁸ Also, the United States planned to withdraw all its tactical nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea by the end of 1991.

In addition to reducing its military presence on the Korean Peninsula, Washington tried to improve its relationship with

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense. *A Strategic Framework for the Asia-Pacific Rim: Report to Congress*. Washington D.C.: Department of Defense, (1991): 3.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense. *A Strategic Framework for the Asian Pacific Rim*.

North Korea. During the implementation of “cross recognition,”¹⁹ Washington did not rule out the possibility of normalizing its relationship with Pyongyang. Nonetheless, Washington committed to promoting normalization of the bilateral relationship unless Pyongyang fulfilled the following requirements: (1) North Korea needed to sign the IAEA’s safeguard agreement and further comply with the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT); (2) recover the remainder American military personnel (war prisoners) during the Korean War; (3) suspend supporting to terrorist activities, and; (4) not to withdraw from inter-Korean dialogues.²⁰ In addition, the United States and South Korea suspended the military drill called the Team Spirit in November 1991 to encourage North Korea to accept the IAEA’s inspection.

However, North Korea saw the signal of the U.S. forces withdrawing from the Korean Peninsula and the fierce battle between the ruling and opposition parties in South Korea as an opportunity to weaken the power of the South. These

¹⁹ “Cross-Recognition” means that two Koreas should be recognized by regional powers within Northeast Asia. More specifically, China and Russia established their relationship with South Korea, whereas the United States and Japan normalized their relationship with North Korea. This proposal helps confidence-building and peace-building on the Korean Peninsula. However, North Korea believes the proposal freezes the unification process on the Korean Peninsula and is therefore reluctant to accept this proposal. Reference: Young-ho Park. “Issues and Prospects for Cross-Recognition: A Korean Perspective,” *The Korean Journal of National Unification*, no. 3 (1994): 49–62.

²⁰ Diplomatic Archives of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (South Korea), *U.S.-North Korea Relations 1991*, no. 32127.

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circumstances provided a favorable setting for North Korea to pursue pragmatic tactics to minimize international pressure on its regime and rapidly increase its military and economic power for self-rehabilitation by improving relations with South Korea.

IV. North Korea at a Crossroad and the First Nuclear Crisis

With the collapse of the communist bloc after the Cold War, North Korea suffered from abandonment anxieties as both Russia and China either terminated or reduced their support for North Korea. Moreover, North Korea distrusted the assurance of the international NPT system. The Kim family believed that developing North Korean nuclear capabilities was the only way to ensure their regime's survival. Therefore, North Korea did not comply with the U.S. directives, which triggered the first nuclear crisis in 1993.

Prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev attempted to reduce Moscow's diplomatic burden for the sake of addressing the issues within the country. Through his diplomatic approach called the "New Thinking" (Новое мышление), Gorbachev improved the tense relationship with the U.S.-led Capitalist Bloc by agreeing to promote arms reduction and nuclear non-proliferation. In addition, the Soviet Union no longer provided economic and military assistance to the members of the Communist Bloc, eventually, the Warsaw Pact disbanded in

1991.²¹ In the meantime, Gorbachev showed his willingness to reconcile with China and sought to promote cooperation between two countries within the economic and scientific research realms. Moscow resolved the three barriers (三大障礙)²² and Gorbachev visited Beijing in 1989; his visit normalized Moscow's relations with Beijing.²³ Moscow's conciliatory policy with Washington and Beijing reduced Pyongyang's values to ensure Moscow's leadership within the Communist bloc. In order words, changes in Moscow's foreign policy intensified Pyongyang's fear of diplomatic isolation since the 1980s.²⁴

Gorbachev's "New Thinking" approach altered Moscow's policy on the Korean Peninsula. Traditionally, the Soviet Union provided economic assistance and security guarantees to North Korea due to the threat caused by the U.S.-ROK alliance. However, during the Gorbachev era, Moscow expanded its connection with Seoul to attract South Korean enterprises to invest in the Soviet Union and the two countries established

²¹ Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev. *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*. New York: Harper & Row, (1988).

²² The Chinese government was willing to normalize the bilateral relationship if Moscow resolved the three barriers: (1) withdraw the Soviet troops in Afghanistan; (2) withdraw the Soviet troops within the Sino-Soviet border, and; (3) ceased its support to Vietnam for the invasion of Cambodia.

²³ John W. Garver. "The 'New Type' of Sino-Soviet Relations," *Asian Survey* 29, no. 12 (1989): 1136–52. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644761>.

²⁴ Benjamin S. Lambeth. "The Decline Soviet Threat: Implications for International Security and Regional Prospective for the Korean Peninsula," *Korea and World Affairs* XV, no. 1 (1991): 85–101; Vasily V. Mikheev. "New Soviet Approach to North Korea: A Problem of Morality in Foreign Policy," *Korea and World Affairs* XV, no. 3 (1991): 442–456.

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diplomatic ties in 1991.²⁵ Furthermore, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, as Russia focused on restoring the country's lethargic economy, Moscow terminated its alliance treaty and ended economic assistance to North Korea.²⁶

Same as Moscow, China also reduced its support for North Korea, which increased Pyongyang's abandonment anxiety. In the 1970s, the Chinese government implemented economic reforms to restore its lethargic economy, whereas Pyongyang insisted on maintaining its socialist policy line.²⁷ Furthermore, China managed to overcome the diplomatic hardship caused by the political incident in 1989 so that Beijing tried to engage with South Korea.²⁸ Thus, Beijing's engagement policy with Seoul

²⁵ Tae Dong Chung. "Korea's Nordpolitik: Achievements & Prospects," *Asian Perspective* 15, no. 2 (1991): 149–78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42703974>; Seung-ho Joo. "South Korea's Nordpolitik and the Soviet Union (Russia)," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 7, no. 2 (1993): 404–50. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23254195>.

²⁶ Seung-Ho Joo. "Russia and North Korea, 1992–2006: From Distant Allies to Normal Neighbors," *Korea Observer* 38, no. 1 (2007): 65–99.

²⁷ Zhihua Shen and Yafeng Xia. *A Misunderstood Friendship: Mao Zedong, Kim Il-Sung, and Sino–North Korean Relations, 1949–1976*. New York: Columbia University Press, (2018).

²⁸ Due to the political incident that took place in Beijing in June 1989, the United States and democratic countries enforced sanctions against China to pressure Beijing to improve human rights within the country. However, South Korea was the only country that did not enforce sanctions against China. Instead, Seoul implemented its "Nordpolitik" that engaged with China. Therefore, Beijing considered Seoul's engagement policy as an opportunity to overcome its diplomatic isolation. Reference: David M. Lampton. *Same Bed, Different Dreams: Managing U.S.- China Relations, 1989–2000*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2002); Shen and Xia. *A Misunderstood Friendship*.

resulted in sidelining Pyongyang's interests. For instance, the Chinese government gave the green light to the admission of two Koreas to the United Nations with separate seats and normalized its diplomatic ties with Seoul in 1992.²⁹ Additionally, the Chinese government no longer used friendship prices for trade with North Korea. Instead, China adopted market prices to conduct trade with North Korea, which resulted in rising costs for Pyongyang to conduct foreign trade and increased North Korea's economic burden of conducting trade with China.

The absence of support from China and the Soviet Union, along with the changing strategic environment after the Cold War, thereby generated a strong sense of isolation and insecurity for North Korea to ensure its regime survival. North Korea believed that the Chinese and the Soviet-style economic reform compromised the plurality of socialism as their informs introduced liberal ideas and the market mechanism to their country. If Pyongyang promoted the same style of reform, the Kim family feared that the reform would generate a threat to the unity and cohesion of North Korean society. In response to this trend, North Korea insulated itself to secure Kim's regime.³⁰

²⁹ Jae-ho Hwang, and Lyong Choi. "Re-Thinking Normalisation between the ROK and the PRC in the Early 1990s: The South Korean Perspective," *Cold War History* 15, no. 4 (October 2015): 557–78.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2015.1019869>.

³⁰ Sung Chull Kim. "Juche Idea: Base of Regime Legitimation of North Korea in the Age of Decaying Socialism," *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies* 1 (1992): 151–74.

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Furthermore, without support from Russia and China, North Korea could not sustain its economy, and it was even suffering from food shortages due to the inefficiency of its socialist economy. North Korea's GNP for 1989 was estimated at 21.1 billion USD and per capita GNP at 1987 USD, roughly one-tenth and one-fifth, respectively, of South Korea's GNP (210.1 billion and 4,968 USD).³¹

In response to international pressure, Pyongyang insisted on developing its nuclear capabilities. The Kim family believed that the development of nuclear capabilities helped sustain its energy supply, thereby reducing its economic dependence on foreign countries. In addition, nuclear capabilities can be used for military purposes. With nuclear capabilities, the Kim regime believed that Pyongyang could enhance its international prestige, thereby overcoming the hardships it suffered during the 1990s.³²

Initially, North Korea accepted the inspection of its nuclear facilities conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, the inspection process suffered from deadlocks. During the inspection of North Korea's nuclear facilities, the IAEA found that there were inconsistencies between the North's

³¹ Sang-Woo Rhee. "North Korea in 1990: Lonesome Struggle to Keep Chuch'e," *Asian Survey* 31, no. 1 (1991): 71–78.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2645187>.

³² Edward Howell. "The Juche H-Bomb? North Korea, Nuclear Weapons and Regime-State Survival," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (2020): 1051–68.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz253>.

claim and the IAEA's findings regarding the existence of undeclared plutonium.³³ Subsequently, on February 9, 1993, the IAEA requested additional information and demanded access to two undeclared sites suspected of containing nuclear waste products from the clandestine production of plutonium. During the dispute between North Korea and the IAEA, Washington resumed the Team Spirit military drills in 1993 which made North Korea felt offend even though South Korea invited North Korea to dispatch a delegate to observe the drill.

To express North Korea's dissatisfaction, Pyongyang violated its commitments and stood firm against the U.S.; Pyongyang's behavior triggered the first nuclear crisis. In 1993, North Korea announced to withdrawal of itself from the NPT regime and rejected the IAEA's demand to conduct ad-hoc inspections of undeclared sites. Pyongyang believed that its response was to protect North Korea's sovereignty and security against the threat of Washington assuming that the U.S. aimed to

³³ After the IAEA's inspections of North Korean nuclear facilities, the IAEA made the following conclusions that triggered North Korea's dissatisfaction: (1) the construction of a huge radioactive chemical laboratory in Yongbyon was a violation of the Joint Denuclearization of the Koreas agreed on December 31, 1991; (2) the extraction of Plutonium at North Korean nuclear reactors exceeded several times of the IAEA's standard; (3) the model of nuclear reactors used in Yongbyon was similar with the reactor used in Chernobyl that had security concern, and; (4) the IAEA team was denied to access two unreported nuclear waste site and there was a suspicion that the sites were part of North Korea's military nuclear program. Reference: Evgenity P. Bazhanov. "Military-Strategic Aspects of the North Korean Nuclear Program," in *The North Korean Nuclear Program: Security, Strategy and New Perspectives from Russia*. New York: Routledge, (2000): 101–9.

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subvert Pyongyang's regime using a nuclear non-proliferation regime.³⁴

In response to the nuclear crisis, Washington tried to assure North Korea to encourage to remain in the NPT and accept the IAEA's inspections. Although the United States planned to adopt a military operation to eliminate North Korea's nuclear facilities, the proposal was rejected by policy elites.³⁵ Instead, the United States adopted diplomatic channels to convince North Korea's compliance. As Table 1 shows, the United States tried to ensure not adopt military means on North Korea, committed to providing energy assistance, and suspended the 1994 Team Spirit military drill. Moreover, former President Carter visited Pyongyang to negotiate with North Korea to resolve the crisis.

³⁴ "Source Material: Statement Released by the Government of North Korea, Decelerating Its Decision to Withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation (NPT), Pyongyang, March 12, 1993," *Korea and World Affairs* 17, no. 1 (1993): 176–80.

³⁵ Kimberly Peh and Soul Park. "Staying the Course: Denuclearization and Path Dependence in the U.S.'s North Korea Policy," *North Korean Review* 17, no. 1 (2021): 57–78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27033550>; Leon V. Sigal. "North Korean Nuclear Brinkmanship, 1993-94 and 2002-03," in *North Korea and the World*, Byung Chul Koh, eds. Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, (2004): 35–60.

Table 1 Washington's Talks with North Korea to Settle the Nuclear Crisis

Date	Participating Officials	Places	Content of the meeting
June 11, 1993	North Korea: First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok-ju The United States: Assistant Secretary of State Robert L. Gallucci	New York	Both sides agreed the principles of: 1. Against the threat and the use of force, including nuclear weapons 2. Promote a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula 3. Support the peaceful unification on the Korean Peninsula
July 19, 1993	North Korea: First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok-ju The United States: Assistant Secretary of State Robert L. Gallucci	Geneva	1. The United States assured not to adopt military means (including nuclear weapons) against North Korea 2. The United States prepared to provide Light Water Moderated Reactors (LWRs) for North Korea to replace its graphite moderated reactors and associated nuclear facilities 3. Both sides agreed to apply full and impartial IAEA safeguards 4. North Korea claimed it was ready to resume the inter-Korea talks
February 25, 1994	North Korea: North Korea's Deputy U.S. Permanent Representative Ho Jong The United States: U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Tom Hubbard	New York	1. The United States agreed to suspend the Team Spirit military drill with South Korea in 1994 2. North Korea agreed to comply with the IAEA safeguard

Sources: "Source Material: Joint North Korean-U.S. Statement, Announcing the Suspension of North Korea's Decision to Withdrawal from the NPT, June 11, 1993," *Korea and World Affairs* XVII, no. 2 (1993): 370; "Source Material: Joint Statement by the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Geneva, July 19, 1993," *Korea and World Affairs* XVII, no. 3 (1993): 549–549; "Source Material: 4-Point Agreement Concluding the U.S.-DPRK Working-Level Talk, Embracing International Inspection of North Korean Nuclear

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Facilities by March 1, New York, February 1994,” Korea and World Affairs XVIII, no. 1 (1994): 143.

V. The 1994 Agreed Framework and the Failure of Assurance to North Korea

The first nuclear crisis was triggered after North Korea attempted to withdraw from the NPT and rejected the IAEA's inspections. During the crisis, former U.S. President Carter visited Pyongyang to settle the crisis; Kim Jong-Il took a conciliatory approach to the U.S. after the sudden death of Kim Il-sung. After the bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea took place in Geneva in 1994, both sides reached an agreement by signing the Agreed Framework on October 21, 1994. In this agreement, the U.S. provided the following assurances to encourage North Korea to maintain its membership in the NPT regime and allow the IAEA's inspections of its nuclear facilities:³⁶

1. North Korea's graphite moderator and other facilities have been replaced by two light-water reactors (LWR). In addition, to prevent the generation of energy by the freezing of graphite-moderated reactors and related facilities, the United States agreed to provide 500,000 tons of heavy oil to North Korea until the construction of the light-water reactors was completed;

³⁶ “Agreed Framework between the United States of America and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea,” UN Peacemaker, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://peacemaker.un.org/node/1129>.

2. Normalized political and economic relations between the United States and North Korea;
3. Denuclearize the Korean Peninsula; and
4. Strengthen the non-nuclear proliferation regime.

After the agreement, the Clinton administration agreed to remove sanctions on North Korea to promote a positive memorandum of the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.³⁷ In the long run, the Agreed Framework was expected to normalize US-North Korea relations, bolster inter-Korean relations, and establish a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.³⁸ However, the United States failed to implement its assurances and it adopted a hardline approach to North Korea after its leadership transition from President Clinton to President George W. Bush in 2000. Thus, North Korea stood firmly against the United States.

After the conclusion of the Agreed Framework, the Korean Energy Development Organization was established to implement the construction of the LWRs. Due to the delay in implementing the Agreed Framework, the cost of constructing the LWRs increased from USD 4 billion to USD 5 billion. Under such a circumstance, the United States was reluctant to allocate more funding to constructing the LWRs as Washington found it

³⁷ "Source Material: Statement by the U.S. State Department on Easing U.S. Economic Sanctions against North Korea, Partial Lifting of Travel and Business Restrictions, and as Agreement in Permit Direct Telephone Links, Washington D.C., January 20, 1995," *Korea and World Affairs* XIX, no. 1 (1995): 146–47.

³⁸ Christopher Lawrence. "Normalization by Other Means."

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burdensome to deliver HFO to North Korea.³⁹ In addition, South Korea was willing to support the construction projects. However, there were some restrictions on the implementation of projects by the South Koreans. First, North Koreans were reluctant to adopt South Korean reactors as Pyongyang worried about whether they could rely on Seoul's energy supply, which they believed may undermine their sovereignty. Second, South Korea suffered from the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 produced difficulty for the government to allocate funding for construction projects.⁴⁰

In addition to postponing the enforcement of the Agreed Framework, the United States failed to fulfill its assurance to North Korea. In fact, as the Agreed Framework is not a legal treaty, the agreement is not legally binding for the United States to implement. Moreover, after the midterm election in 1994, the Republican Party swept the majority in both houses of Congress and began to actively check Clinton's engagement policy toward

³⁹ James M. Minnich. "The Denuclearization of North Korea: A Critical Analysis of the 1994 Agreed Framework," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* XIV, no. 2 (2002): 5–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10163270209464023>.

⁴⁰ Eunyoung Ha and Christopher Hwang. "The U.S.-North Korea Geneva Agreed Framework: Strategic Choices and Credible Commitments," *North Korean Review* 11, no. 1 (2015): 7–23. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908953>.

North Korea, including the LWRs, making it difficult for KEDO to enforce construction projects.⁴¹

Furthermore, after the Clinton administration, the U.S. emphasized the use of deterrence strategies against North Korea, rendering Pyongyang firmly against Washington. Since President George W. Bush replaced President Clinton, Washington has increased its pressure on Pyongyang for denuclearization. Due to North Korea's role in the proliferation of nuclear weaponry and its network with terrorist states, the Bush administration designated North Korea as one of the targets of the "War on Terror" campaign. Through Bush's "HAWK Engagement" approach to North Korea, the United States amplified its use of economic sanctions, imposed pressure against North Korea by working with South Korea, Japan, and China, and conducted human rights diplomacy with North Korea to promote Pyongyang's internal changes.⁴²

⁴¹ Jungkun Seo. "Agreements Without Commitments? The U.S. Congress and the U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework, 1994-2002," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 27, no. 1 (2015): 107-22.
<http://10.22883/kjda.2015.27.1.007>.

⁴² Victor D. Cha. "Hawk Engagement and Preventive Defense on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security* 27, no. 1 (2002): 40-78.
<https://doi.org/10.1162/016228802320231226>; Victor D. Cha, "Korea's Place in the Axis," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 3 (2002): 79-92.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/20033164>.

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Although the United States assured Pyongyang not to promote “regime change” in North Korea,⁴³ the assurance had no credit as they initiated a military strike against Iraq. Pyongyang believed it would be the next target of the U.S. military operation. Thus, to prevent itself from being the victim of the U.S. military strike, not only did Pyongyang accelerate the process of developing its nuclear program, but it also placed nuclear development ahead of other agendas such as economic development.

VI. Conclusion

This paper explores the reasons why the high-level thaw during the early 1990s failed to achieve denuclearization of North Korea by shedding new light on the “assurance aspect” of the U.S. policy towards North Korea. This study argues that assurances should align with deterrence to help reduce the security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula, thereby providing a positive momentum for North Korea to promote denuclearization. Nevertheless, political realities produced difficulty for Washington to implement its assurance policy toward Pyongyang. Moreover, after the Clinton administration, the United States emphasized adopting stronger deterrent tactics.

⁴³ Victor D. Cha. *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future*. New York: Ecco, (2018).

This research adopts the first nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula as a case study to explore the failure of Washington's assurance in Pyongyang. Unlike the current security environment in the Korean Peninsula, policy choices were more flexible than now in the early 1990s as the decade was the period of reconciliation between the United States and China and North Korea had yet to start developing nuclear weapons. Although there are differences between the current situation and the first nuclear crisis, this paper can provide the following policy implications.

First, it is essential for policymakers to develop well-developed assurance measures to promote North Korea's policy change. This strategy should be adopted correspondently with the deterrence strategy. Assurance helps promote a genuine and substantive process for denuclearization and reduce the security dilemma on the Korean Peninsula, thereby creating a positive momentum for denuclearization. However, as North Korea has frequently violated its commitment after the negotiations, policymakers in the U.S. and South Korea should continue to use deterrence to prevent North Korea from undermining their interests.

Second, when dealing with North Korea, policymakers in South Korea should understand the country's fundamental interests. It is clear that "security guarantee" that North Korea looks for is to ensure Pyongyang's regime and reduce the U.S.

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presence in the Korean Peninsula. Pyongyang's demand has become more extensive and blatant since the completion of its sixth nuclear test.⁴⁴

Finally, it is necessary to revisit the limitations of an international regime for North Korea's denuclearization. The NPT system lacks a binding force, and there are weak means of positive assurance to block nuclear attacks from nuclear states compared with alliances. Although inter-Korean and US-DPRK negotiations began in the early 1990s, the international community has played a minor role. It is necessary to reassess reassurance, as the balance of fear between the United States and the Soviet Union collapsed after the Cold War. The international community should contemplate appropriate assurance measures in the event that North Korea gives up its nuclear missiles and substantially changes its behaviors and send a well-coordinated signal to North Korea.

⁴⁴ In a report to the 8th Labor Party Congress in January 2021, Kim Jong-un declared that "(the) consolidation of North Korea's status as a nuclear weapons state" and "building a state nuclear force is a strategic and dominant task to be prioritized in the administration of building a socialist state." Reference: "On Report Made by Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un at Eighth Party Congress of WPK," The National Committee on North Korea, January 25, 2021, https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju_8th_party_congress_speech_summary.pdf/file_view.

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