U.S. and North Korea: A Gordian Conflict

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Abstract

Long standing tensions between North Korea and the U.S. epitomize an intractable conflict. Since the end of World War II, such events as the Korean War (still without a formal peace agreement), five nuclear tests by North Korea, U.S. and international economic sanctions against North Korea, regular large-scale U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises, and repeated North Korean missile tests all illustrate the persistence of conflict. Over the same period there have been a variety of bilateral and multilateral efforts directed at addressing the situation including the Agreed Framework, six-party talks, the Kaesong Industrial Complex, and the September, 2005 Agreement to end the North Korean nuclear program. None of these efforts have been durably successful. A central argument of this paper is that conflicts such as this can usefully be thought of as problems under a description. Sometimes changing the description may offer ways to transform what has appeared to be an intractable situation. Conflicts amenable to such re-description are termed Gordian conflicts in recognition of the Gordium legend. Informal engagement among parties to the conflict, going beyond technical diplomatic negotiations, can nurture trust and empathy helpful to such re-descriptions. A program of ongoing exchanges between U.S. and North Korean academic scientists together with occasional Track II meetings has provided a limited but robust context for participants to develop both trust and empathy. A problem re-description is suggested to provide a path forward with what has to date seemed an intractable conflict.

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1 Introduction

In 333 BC, Alexander the Great is supposed to have reached Gordium (about 50 miles southwest of what is now Ankara, Turkey), the capital of Phrygia. There, near the agora, he found a chariot lashed to a pole by an intricate knot. The knot was said to have been tied by Gordius, the father of Midas, sometime in the 2nd Millennium BC. Exposed to the elements, the knot had been dampened and then dried many times and, as a consequence, continued to tighten. Legend held that whoever untied that knot would come to rule all of Asia. Alexander, after unsuccessfully struggling with it for a bit, is said to have taken out his sword and with one swipe cut the knot in half. In so doing, he was credited with resolving a seemingly intractable challenge and went on to conquer much of Asia. A Gordian knot has come to denote an intractable or impossible problem transformable only by bold action.

At its core, the Gordian approach has several notable characteristics. First, problems have histories. The knot Alexander encountered was tougher even than what had been originally tied by Gordius. Second, it illustrates that problems exist within a description. A problem which appears intractable under one description may yield under a different one. Untying a knot may have been understood and described differently by Gordium residents prior to Alexander’s sword slash. Third, as problem descriptions are represented linguistically, they cannot be private. As Wittgenstein argued, language is a public enterprise. For a problem re-description to be successful, there must be a sense in which relevant publics accept, whether freely or under coercion, that the new description is, in relevant respects, isomorphic to the previously accepted description. Consider Alexander’s cutting of the knot. One could readily imagine that, absent the power of his army, residents of Gordium might have attacked Alexander for destroying what had been a lucrative tourist attraction rather than accepted his resolution of what had been viewed as an intractable problem.

A theme of this paper is that seemingly intractable foreign policy conflicts such as that involving the United States (U.S.) and North Korea have features of a Gordian problem.

\[1\] While the security of the Korean Peninsula is an issue requiring multilateral attention, this paper’s focus
History matters and is viewed differently in the U.S. and North Korea. Not surprisingly, these different histories have led to “the conflict” being understood and described differently in the two countries. Moreover, those differences are exacerbated by significant power differentials between the two countries.

In January, 2002, U.S. president George W. Bush declared Iran, Iraq, and North Korea to be an “axis of evil” and described them as supporting terrorism and developing weapons of mass destruction. Since that speech, the U.S. launched a protracted and deeply controversial war in Iraq and reached a nuclear deal with Iran. In the same period, North Korea conducted five nuclear tests and has been subjected to increasingly heavy economic sanctions by the U.S. and the international community.

Currently there is growing concern, exacerbated by remarks from a U.S. presidential candidate, that Japan and South Korea might go nuclear thus initiating a Northeast Asia nuclear arms race involving China, Japan, and the two Koreas. U.S. and South Korea agreed to deployment of a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense System (THAAD) near Daegu in South Korea triggering an angry response from China. As was the case with with Gordius’ chariot and the pole, the knotty entangling of the U.S. and North Korea seems ever more difficult to transform.

2 Describing the “Same Thing” Differently

This section contains a set of historical examples intended both to illustrate connections between the U.S. and North Korea and to evoke a sense that people in North Korea and the U.S. might describe those histories in systematically different ways. In particular the examples were chosen to suggest that North Korea views relations with the U.S. in a deeply
historical manner in which its sovereignty and security have long been central issues[^1]. North Korea’s negotiators are generally in place for a long time (relative to counterparts in the U.S.) and it has been ruled continuously by the Kim family. On the other hand, the U.S. government (USG) has viewed North Korea primarily through the lens of nuclear proliferation. Official interactions with North Korea have seen a number of shifts in both policy and personnel due partially to the changes of government which are a feature of electoral democracies. Except in the face of a nuclear crisis, Korean issues have generally not been front burner ones in the U.S.

William Perry, then U.S. North Korea Policy Coordinator and Special Advisor to the President, famously said that we “have to deal with the North Korean government not as we wish they would be, but as in fact they are (Federation of American Scientists, 1999).” But how are we to know how in fact they are? Donald P. Gregg describes North Korea as the “longest-running failure in the history of American espionage (Gregg, 2014, p. 279).[^3]” This points to a methodological quandary where we have a paucity of hard evidence but an organizational memory filled with failed agreements. The situation is made more difficult by deep differences with regard to proper forms of governance and rights and roles of individuals in society. To much of the world, including the U.S., the North Korean regime is on the distinctly wrong side of political history.

North Korea is often portrayed in a cartoon-like manner in U.S. media (and the opposite is true in North Korean publications) with many examples of demonization of the other on both sides. At the same time relatively few North Koreans visit the U.S. and, mirroring the U.S. experience, few North Koreans have had direct exposure to Americans. A consequence is that it becomes difficult for an American official (North Korean official) to imagine the world as a North Korean official (American official) sees it.

In such situations it is reasonable to expect that past interpretations of experience become[^2]

[^1]: Those seeking a more complete history should see such standard references as (Cumings, 2005, 2010; Oberdorfer & Carlin, 2013).
[^2]: Gregg’s positions include service as CIA Station Chief in Seoul, national security advisor to Vice President George H. W. Bush, and U.S. Ambassador to South Korea.
“data” for interpreting new behaviors rather than seeing these behaviors as independent data requiring fresh analysis. The result is motivated reasoning wherein new information is filtered and justified through past interpretations thus hardening those interpretations rather than serving as tests of them. Moreover, the paucity of direct information about human context and intentions inextricably results in even greater than normal focus on perceptions of capabilities. This generates a positive feedback loop with each side reacting to estimates of the capabilities of the other. And, given the human tendency to guard against worst case outcomes, this can lead, quite unconsciously, to a simultaneous bias toward overestimating the other’s capabilities and discounting what little evidence may exist regarding intentions.

For example, North Korean officials and U.S. officials each believe the other does not honor agreements. One potential safeguard against this sort self-reinforcing demonization is frequent informal interaction. In this sense the value of formal institutions such as embassies or the UN is not simply the agreements they make possible but the opportunities they offer for diplomats to interact informally. Public diplomacy where ordinary citizens from each country interact over shared interests or issues is another way of breaking down demonization. Examples here include the performance of the New York Philharmonic in Pyongyang in 2008 and academic science engagements between Syracuse University and counterparts at Kim Chaek University of Technology and the State Academy of Sciences in North Korea. However, the success of these sorts of efforts has been hampered by lack of mutual diplomatic recognition (exchanges require visas) and financial sanctions and export control policies that render exchanges between the U.S. and North Korea extremely cumbersome. Lest this be considered the normal state of affairs between two conflicting countries with widely differing political systems, consider the U.S. and Soviet Union during the Cold War. Then U.S. and Soviet scientists worked in each other’s laboratories and built relationships which proved critical when it came time to determine whether arms control agreements were verifiable.

Kip Thorne, a theoretical physicist who participated in many such exchanges as a professor

\[4\text{A classic statement of this argument is in (Alger, 1961).}\]
at the California Institute of Technology, has suggested that these relationships played an
important role in the peaceful ending of the Cold War. Beyond this, however, the science
exchanges enabled each side to put a human face on the other and counter, even if in a small
way, efforts to demonize.

Such interactions can facilitate the development of empathy. Empathy requires consider-
ing the state of consciousness of another in one of at least two ways. You could imagine
yourself to be in the state of consciousness you would be if you were in the conditions in
which you understand the other to be. In this case, you could use your reasoning to estimate
what the other might do. As a simplified example consider a U.S. policy maker thinking “if
I were North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, I would use money for economic development and
not to maintain a large military and build nuclear weapons.” More difficult is to imagine the
state of consciousness of a person of the sort you believe the other to be in the conditions
they understand themselves to be in. Here you try to imagine the thinking process of another
person while also understanding the situation that person feels herself to be in. This might
result in a U.S. analyst saying “while I disagree with North Korea’s emphasis on the military
and its nuclear program, I understand why Kim Jong Un might believe that North Korea is
threatened by the U.S.” Empathy, in this second sense, need not require agreement. As the
last example illustrates, you can be empathetic even with a person with whose views you
find anathema.

An actual example of this occurred during a visit to Pyongyang as a part of our science
engagement initiative. While we had met with our counterparts in Syracuse, this was our
first meeting in North Korea and we were trying to negotiate a governance structure for
our exchange program with Kim Chaek University of Technology. The Syracuse group
suggested forming a committee of researchers from each institution and calling it something

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5Personal communication, 2010.
6Pinkston and Saunders (2003) suggest how empathy might be helpful in formulating U.S. policy toward
North Korea and Seo and Thorson (2016) offer an extended discussion of the role of empathy in science
engagement with North Korea.
7As a thought experiment, imagine how a U.S. official might feel if North Korea had 28,000 troops based
in Canada.
like the *Joint Coordinating Committee*. The meetings up until then had gone well and I was surprised that North Korean academics seemed uncomfortably resistant to the idea. We had been speaking through a translator with no apparent issues and now things seemed stalled. Fortunately, a member of our group was Frederick Carriere who was then executive vice president of the New York based Korea Society. Carriere had lived some 20 years in South Korea and was fluent in Korean language and, importantly, culture. He picked up on the fact that for the North Koreans, *committees* implied some sort of formal government involvement and thus would require special permission. We then quickly changed to proposing a *Joint Governance Group* and the problem was transformed. The group went on to meet faithfully for a number of years in both Syracuse and Pyongyang. Absent Carriere’s empathetic insight we either would have ended with no formal agreement or, perhaps worse, might have formally agreed to a *committee* only to have it fall apart later when expectations were not met. The point here is that formal agreements work well when they ratify empathetically reached agreements. In this section we will see examples of formal agreements which ultimately failed in part due to the sides seeing them quite differently.

### 2.1 Taft-Katsura

On July 27, 1905, just prior to the September signing of the Treaty of Portsmouth formally ending the Russo-Japanese War, then U.S. Secretary of War William Howard Taft met in Tokyo with Japanese Prime Minister, Count Katsura Taro. In 1924, a memorandum summarizing the Taft-Katsura discussions was discovered by the U.S. historian Tyler Dennett while researching the Theodore Roosevelt papers at the Library of Congress. Dennett published the text of the document in his article “President Roosevelt’s Secret Pact with Japan (Dennett, 1924).” The “secret pact”, Dennett argued, involved Japan’s claiming no interest in the Philippines while also providing a rationale for Japan to serve as protector of Korea.

In November of 1905, with Japanese troops surrounding the Korean Imperial Palace, Japan and Korea signed the Ulsa Treaty making Korea a protectorate of Japan and, in so
doing, eliminated Korea’s diplomatic sovereignty. Japan’s occupation of Korea continued until the end of World War II. Echoes of the 1905 Taft-Katsura memorandum continue to reverberate with North Korea understandably being particularly sensitive to issues surrounding its sovereignty. To this day there are no formal diplomatic relations between the U.S. and North Korea.

While Dennett’s paper suggested that this was a secret pact between the U.S. and Japan in which the U.S. agreed not to object to what would become Japan’s occupation of the Korean Peninsula, more recent research (Esthus, 1959) argues that the memorandum was simply a summary of the discussion between two ministers of government. Such summaries were typical at the time and the description of the summary as an agreement simply meant that the two parties, Taft and Katsura, agreed that the summary was accurate and not that it reflected state policy. Nonetheless, Larsen and Seeley (2014) provide an account of how in today’s North Korea, the Taft-Katsura memorandum serves as an example of “American perfidy which justifies the need for constant vigilance and avoidance of undue dependence on any outside power” while South Koreans typically view Taft-Katsura as an example of the U.S. not living up to its ideals. And, I suspect, were a survey to be done in the U.S. more people would indicate a preference for Harambe for president than would claim to have ever heard of Taft-Katsura.

2.2 Division of the Korean Peninsula

On August 10, 1945, one day after the bombing of Nagasaki, Japan asked for terms of surrender. That evening two U.S. Army Colonels, Charles Bronsteel and Dean Rusk, were told by their superiors that they had 30 minutes to propose a division of the Korean Peninsula between U.S. and Soviet Union. Using a 1942 National Geographic map of Asia, they proposed dividing the peninsula at the 38th parallel. This was signed by President Truman and became a part of General Order Number One in which Japanese commanders in Korea north of the 38th parallel were to surrender to Soviet forces and those south of the the 38th
parallel were to surrender to U.S. forces. Significantly, the National Geographic map provided latitude and longitude information but did not include provincial boundaries. The division appears to have been made absent Korean participation and, given the time constraints, sensitivity to Korean political and cultural issues. Lee (1983) quotes George McCune (then at the Korea Desk in the U.S. Department of State) as noting, “almost no thought at all was given to Korea as a nation of more than 26 million persons.” The hasty and artificial division of Korea fueled the fires of nationalism on both sides of the 38th parallel. It is not surprising then that many Koreans, whatever their political differences, would feel themselves and their divided peninsula to be pawns in the developing Cold War.

2.3 Korean War

By 1949, all Soviet forces had withdrawn from the North and most U.S. military had left the South. What followed were a string of border skirmishes between North and South. The dominant U.S. and South Korean narrative has it that on June 25, 1950, North Korea invaded the South and thus began the Korean War. The Korean War was brutal for almost all touched by it. Soldiers fought in difficult conditions often with inadequate equipment and atrocities were committed by both sides. Pyongyang and Seoul were both severely damaged. Cumings (2010) notes that the tonnage of bombs dropped by the U.S. on North Korea exceeded the total amount dropped in the Pacific during World War II. (635,000 tons in Korea and 503,000 tons in the Pacific Theater). In addition to direct loss of life, there was catastrophic flooding as a consequence of the destruction of dams and levees (Cumings, 2005, p. 289). War fighting terminated on July 27, 1953 with an armistice signed jointly by general officers from the United Nations Command and the Korean People’s

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8 Referenced in (Barry, 2012).
9 Visitors to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang, North Korea will be exposed to a different narrative in which the war was initiated by American imperialism.
10 The heavy aerial bombing experienced by North Korea may help to explain some their sensitivity to the deployment of U.S. bombers during U.S.-South Korea military exercises.
Army (representing North Korea and China).\footnote{The South Korean government was not a signatory to the armistice. This remains a fact of considerable significance to many South Koreans.}

Estimates of the human cost of the Korean War vary widely by both source and date of the estimates. With that caveat, roughly 37,000 Americans died in the conflict (another 7,800 remain missing). South Korea lost 1,000,000 civilians and 217,000 soldiers. North Korean civilian deaths were 600,000 and military losses numbered 406,000. Estimates are that China’s People’s Volunteer Army suffered 400,000 deaths (official Chinese sources put the number at 114,000). To put these numbers into context, South Korea’s population in 1950 was 20.8 million and North Korea’s was 9.5 million. And, of course, these casualties do not include the infrastructure destruction and family separations experienced by both Koreas. In the U.S., the Korean War is sometimes referred to as the \textit{forgotten war}. South and North Korea continue in a state of war to this day.

The political division of the Korean Peninsula was left unchanged by the end of the Cold War with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.\footnote{“Indeed the division of Korea is now the last remnant of the Cold War and lingers as a reminder of superpower nuclear confrontation and a bipolar struggle between Communism and Capitalism.” (Robinson, 2007, p. 188).} It did, however, deprive North Korea of an important ally and major patron.\footnote{Though the Soviet Union had begun to cut back aid to North Korea beginning in 1985. Boris Yeltsin, the president of the new Russian Federation, stopped all aid to North Korea.} Interestingly, earlier that year, August 1991, North and South Korea simultaneously became full members of the United Nations. That provided for North Korea having a UN mission in New York and this remains the only official diplomatic link between the U.S. and North Korea.

\subsection*{2.4 Agreed Framework}

As of this writing there have been five nuclear tests in this century. All were conducted by North Korea. North Korea had signed the nuclear Nonproliferation treaty (NPT) in 1985. However, it did not immediately complete a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) saying it would not do so until U.S. nuclear weapons were
removed from South Korea. In 1991, President George H. W. Bush ordered withdrawal all naval and land-based tactical nuclear weapons based abroad. This included those that had been located in South Korea.

In January, 1992, representatives of the two Koreas signed a joint agreement to de-nuclearize the Korean Peninsula. Later that spring, North Korea ratified its safeguards agreement with the IAEA. The next year, IAEA requested inspections to resolve to discrepancies regarding the amount of reprocessed plutonium in North Korea. North Korea, citing national security, responded by indicating an intent to withdraw from the NPT.

In June of 1993, North Korea retracted its decision to leave the NPT and the U.S. then announced it would not threaten use of force against North Korea and further that it would stay out of North Korea’s internal affairs. Later that year, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) claimed that North Korea had separated enough plutonium to build a nuclear device.

1994 was a critical year in recent U.S.–North Korean relations. By that May, North Korea had begun removing 8,000 spent fuel rods from its recently shut down Yongbyon nuclear reactor. Estimates were that this was enough plutonium to build as many as six devices. In June, IAEA inspectors, denied full access, referred the issue to the UN saying it could no longer be confident about the state of the North’s nuclear program. The U.S. sought UN sanctions against the North and began preparing for a possible strike against the North’s nuclear facilities. Carter and Perry (2002) recalled “The two of us, then at the Pentagon, readied plans for striking at North Korea’s nuclear facilities and for mobilizing hundreds of thousands of American troops for the war that probably would have followed.”

Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter traveled to Pyongyang for meetings with North Korean leader Kil Il Sung in an attempt to resolve the standoff. The meetings were successful in that North Korea agreed to freeze its nuclear program and allow IAEA inspectors to remain

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14 The agreement stated that neither Korea would “test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons, possess nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities “Joint Declaration of South and North Korea on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” 1992.”
at Yongbyon. Negotiations began in Geneva to formalize the agreement but were interrupted by Kim’s death. Finally, they were concluded in October producing the *Agreed Framework*. In this agreement, “the United States promised to help replace the North’s nuclear reactors with two, more-proliferation-resistant light-water reactors; provide security assurances; and, forge diplomatic and economic ties in return for a verifiable end to its nuclear arms program (Sigal, 1997).” The U.S. saw the *Agreed Framework* largely as a non-proliferation agreement. However, the North Korean perspective was different. To them, political provisions such as diplomatic recognition were of primary significance. In their excellent review of U.S.–North Korean negotiations over the 1992-2007 period, Carlin and Lewis (2008) note that the progress on the *Agreed Framework* negotiations were stalled until the U.S. acknowledged the need to include political considerations such as diplomatic recognition. Still, though, many aspects of the agreement had not been fulfilled by the time the it fell apart during the George W. Bush administration following a dispute over North Korean compliance.

It is worth quoting at length from Carlin and Lewis (2008, p. 5) to see the contrast between what was agreed to and what was actually done.

- “Within three months [of October 21] to reduce barriers to trade and investment.” *(Done)*
- To “open a liaison office in the other’s capital.” *(Not done)*
- To “upgrade bilateral relations to the ambassadorial level” as “progress [was] made on issues of concern to each side.” *(Not done)*

In addition, the U.S. obligations were to provide the DPRK:

- “Formal assurances, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons.” *(Not done)*
- Alternative energy “in the form of heavy oil for heating and electricity production.” *(Done)*
- “An LWR [light-water reactor] project with a total generating capability of approximately 2,000 MWe [megawatt (electric)] by a target date of 2003.” *(Under construction but never completed)*

For its part, North Korea agreed to:
Freeze and eventually dismantle its graphite-moderated reactors in operation or under construction and other related facilities. (*Freeze done; dismantlement stage never reached*)

- Accept IAEA monitoring. (*Done*)
- Cooperate to “store safely the spent fuel” from their 5 MWe experimental reactor. (*Done*)
- Remain a party to the NPT, and “take steps to implement” the North–South Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. (*Not done*)

From North Korea’s perspective, the U.S. never followed through on key components of the *Agreed Framework* such as diplomatic recognition and “Formal assurances, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons.” The issue of formal acknowledgment of its sovereign legitimacy has of central importance to North Korea and, as mentioned, can be traced back at least to its understanding of the Taft-Katsura memorandum. Indeed, the ultimate breakdown in the *Agreed Framework* occurred following a 2002 Pyongyang meeting between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju, Depending upon the account, Kang Suk Ju either (i) admitted to a secret North Korean uranium enrichment program, or (ii) asserted the sovereign right of North Korea to pursue such a program if they wished. In any event, the U.S. halted shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea and North Korea withdrew from the NPT in 2003 and conducted its first known nuclear test.

Without going into great detail, a similar issue arose in 2002. On February 29th, leap day, of that year, the U.S. State Department announced that North Korea had “agreed to implement a moratorium on long-range missile launches, nuclear tests and nuclear activities at Yongbyon, including uranium enrichment activities” and the U.S. agreed to provide 240,000 tons of additional food assistance to the North. This agreement followed secret bilateral discussions that had been held in Beijing and were especially noteworthy as the discussions had occurred shortly after Kim Jong Un had assumed leadership following his father’s death the previous December. In April, 2002 to commemorate the centenary of Kim
Il Sung, North Korea attempted to launch what they called a weather satellite. The international community largely condemned the launch on the grounds it utilized banned missile technology. North Korea asserted its sovereign right to explore space. The U.S. and North Korean negotiators disagreed as to whether in negotiating the Leap Day deal the prospective satellite launch had been discussed and understood to be permitted or if it had been discussed and specifically prohibited. The Leap Day deal was over with each side accusing the other of violating it.

3 Implications

In the U.S., the official government view is that North Korea cannot be trusted to honor agreements. For example, in 2009 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is quoted saying “I’m tired of buying the same horse twice (Sanger, 2009)” in reference to what he perceived as a string of agreements broken by North Korea. President Obama, speaking in Seoul in 2012, said “There will be no rewards for provocations. Those days are over. Today we say Pyongyang have the courage to pursue peace and give a better life to the people of North Korea.” Interestingly, North Korean negotiators may have a similar view of the U.S. For example, Wit (2016) quotes an unnamed North Korean official as telling him “It’s easier for us to build nuclear weapons than to be involved with you for decades only to have agreements turn into useless scraps of paper.”

The USG view that North Korea could not be trusted to keep agreements led to refusals to negotiate with them on the grounds that it would be “rewarding bad behavior”. Such reasoning produced the Obama administration policy of “strategic patience” which involved the U.S. sanctioning North Korea and metaphorically sending it to sit in a corner while

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15Sanctions are a popular measure in that they clearly express disapproval by the sanctioning country. However, in democracies such as the U.S., sanctions also have a ratchet like quality in that is is generally easy to obtain legislative approval to impose them but then very difficult to dial them back. In the specific case of North Korea, sanctions have generally been found to be ineffective. In addition to the well known difficulties in coordinating enforcement, sanctions provide incentives for North Korea to “go it alone” when it could be argued that what is needed is for them to become more engaged and interdependent with the
waiting for it to behave “better” by deciding to denuclearize and thus open space for nego-
tiations with the U.S. U.S. public opinion, to the extent that these measures are valid,
appears to support negotiations with 85% of Americans favoring diplomacy rather than mil-
itary measures in dealing with North Korea when last surveyed in 2014 (Snyder, 2014). Of
course, much has happened since 2014.

The examples in the previous section serve as reminders of how U.S.–North Korea re-
lations can be viewed differently depending upon how they are described. Moreover, these
descriptive differences tend to vary by whether one grew up in South Korea, the U.S., or
North Korea. This should not be surprising as each country teaches its children different nar-
ratives about, say, the Korean War. With apologies to Allison (1971), where you now stand
on issues may depend upon where you sat as well as where you now sit. In addition, cultural
artifacts that surround us—museums, novels, movies, monuments, social media feeds—tend
to favor certain narratives and ignore others. Importantly, the success of those narratives
often reflect power in that narratives favored by powerful people, groups, or countries may
be expected to dominate discussions in which those entities participate.

A central argument of this paper is that these differences in how certain events are
understood and described should not all be dismissed as mere political posturing. In some
instances they reflect ontological differences regarding how the political world is constructed.
When there are long standing and significant disagreements, such as exist between the U.S.
and North Korea, it is reasonable to question whether there might be a need for some sort
of bridge to connect the differing ontologies. And, to return the Gordian analogy, perhaps
what would help is a dramatic and discontinuous approach which cuts through the current
impasse.

larger world. Furthermore, sanctions are used domestically by the North Korean leadership as evidence of
the hostile nature of the U.S. and larger international community. Peksen (2016, p. 4) while arguing for the
potential utility of sanctions nevertheless concludes “the failure of economic coercion against North Korea
is consistent with what might be expected given the domestic make-up and practices of the state.”

The paternalistic tone of this metaphor is intentional.

Labeled as Korean Conflict, Forgotten War, Korean War, or Fatherland Liberation War depending upon
where you live and what you read. Descriptions are linguistic and require words to serve as labels for the
things to which they are intended to refer or symbolize.
Whatever North Korea’s intentions, its nuclear program has resulted in a more dangerous Northeast Asia. This danger comes from the risk of Japan and South Korea going nuclear and triggering an arms race as well as the increased probability of miscalculations with, in the worst case, catastrophic results. It is worth keeping in mind that North Korea’s past strategy of bluffs, extreme rhetoric, and somewhat unpredictable behavior can serve a country holding a weak hand well. However, these same traits may have unintended consequences when pursued by a country with nuclear weapons.

The U.S. is the most powerful country in the world and, as suggested above, has had a complicated set of experiences with the Koreas. As such it is one nation that may be in a position to take bold action to address legitimate security interests of both North and South Korea and working collaboratively initiate a path to denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula. Consider several suggestions to transform the U.S.–North Korea conflict by describing it in such a manner as to offer concrete measures simultaneously addressing security and sovereignty concerns of the North while also attacking the very real nonproliferation issue. That they might be seen as overly bold is a sign of how intractable the conflict has become.

1. U.S. propose each country establish a consular office in the other’s capital. This is what was agreed to but never done under the Agreed Framework. With this, the U.S. would acknowledge the legitimacy of North Korea as a sovereign nation and, importantly, provide opportunities for less formal interaction, trust building, and reduction in mutual demonization. Recognition, of course, does not imply policy agreement.

2. In step with (1), the U.S. commit to take a lead in working, through the UN, to produce a peace agreement permanently ending the Korean War. This would be absent any preconditions other than it be accomplished through the UN where both Koreas, and China (along with the U.S.) have representation.

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18 As noted above, establishing a peace regime in Northeast Asia will require multilateral commitment and the development of robust regional structures for addressing the inevitable conflicts. This topic, however, is beyond the scope of this brief paper.
3. The U.S. offer to suspend the annual joint U.S.-South Korea military exercises in return for a cessation of all nuclear testing by the North.

Almost certainly a bridge too far at present, a fourth proposal would be for the U.S. to offer to include North Korea under its nuclear umbrella in return for the North’s complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of its nuclear weapons program. While this may appear extreme, it actually did come up a Track II meeting where it was not rejected out of hand by either side.

While the South is not the focus of this paper, the U.S. properly has responsibility to work with South Korea on (1). (2) does involve the South as a UN member though recall that South Korea was not a signatory to the cease fire ending the Korean War. (3) is similar to an offer made earlier this year by North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Su Yong who is quoted saying “It is really crucial for the United States government to withdraw its hostile policy against the DPRK and as an expression of this, stop the military exercises, war exercises, in the Korean Peninsula. Then we will respond likewise.” (Talmadge, 2016) The U.S. response was that nothing would change until North Korea showed “seriousness” toward eliminating nuclear weapons. While a different time and before North Korea had conducted any nuclear tests, in 1992 U.S. President George H. W. Bush and South Korean President Roh Tae Woo did agree to temporarily halt in the exercises. Perhaps, probably in a different world, UN Secretary General Ban could try to broker this and become a Nobel Peace prize contender as opposed to being involved in what will likely a nasty South Korean presidential campaign after leaving the UN.

The Gordian knot of conflict binding North Korea and the U.S. continues to tighten and become ever more dangerous. Slashing that knot requires bold rethinking and action. That former enemies can become friends is in the U.S. DNA. As U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry’s reminds us “One of America’s most incredible realities continues to be that we’re a country without any permanent enemies.”

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19Kerry made this statement during as address at the University of Virginia, February 20, 2013.
References


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