

H-Diplo ARTICLE REVIEW 943

14 April 2020

Martin A. Smith. "Denuclearising North Korea: Evaluating the United States' Culpability for Failed Agreements, 1993-2008." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 30:3 (September 2019): 556-575.

<https://hdiplo.org/to/AR943>

Article Review Editor: Diane Labrosse | Production Editor: George Fujii

REVIEW BY VAN JACKSON, VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

Bothsidesism, Revisionist History, and the North Korean Nuclear Blame Game

In popular media, "bothsidesism" occurs any time someone renders a false equivalency of competing positions—whether on a moral, logical, or evidentiary basis.¹ It distorts our search for truth and our understanding of current events.

Martin Smith's article in *Diplomacy & Statecraft* courts controversy by superficially appearing to engage in bothsidesism about how North Korea became a de facto nuclear state. Drawing attention away from the great (and illegal) lengths to which North Korea has gone in order to secure the ultimate weapon might lead to accusations of false equivalency. Upon reading the article however, one realizes that Smith renders a historically valid argument that Washington needs to hear more frequently: U.S. policy since the end of the Cold War is at least partially responsible for the nuclear North Korea of today.

Smith's basic argument, of course, is not new. I myself have written two books and numerous articles making this same point.² There are several reasons why the United States is more culpable than conventional wisdom suggests. For one, the means the United States has employed in its policies toward North Korea have been incommensurate with an end as ambitious as its rival's unilateral disarmament.³ Another reason is that America's frequent reliance on coercion has ignored North Korea's likely reaction of defiance and escalation, based on its strategic culture and historical track record.⁴ And third

¹ Laila Lalami, "Bothsidesism' is Poisoning America," *The Nation* (17 December 2019), <https://www.thenation.com/article/trump-impeachment-journalism/>.

² See, for example, Van Jackson, "Threat Consensus and Rapprochement Failure: Revisiting the Collapse of US-North Korea Relations, 1994-2002," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 14:2 (2018): 235-253; Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Van Jackson, *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Van Jackson, *Risk Realism: The Arms Control Endgame for North Korea Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2019).

³ Jackson, "Threat Consensus and Rapprochement Failure"; Jackson, *Risk Realism*.

⁴ Jackson, *On the Brink*, 35-51.

is that the highly contingent, reciprocity-based “tit for tat” approach U.S. officials have taken to nuclear negotiations inadvertently sabotaged implementation of even the modest agreements reached over the years.⁵

Despite being on well-trodden ground, Smith’s piece is welcomed for its color and amplification of what we know. His review of U.S.-North Korea diplomacy during the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations—the crucial period of Pyongyang’s nuclear transition—uncovers three major reasons why it failed to arrest North Korea’s nuclear program: inconsistent focus by senior policy officials; erratic U.S. implementation of American commitments under the 1994 Agreed Framework; and the displacing political priorities of Clinton and Bush toward the end of their respective presidencies. This argument is mostly correct, and a positive contribution to the larger conversation about how such an undesirable outcome came about. But there are two major points worth clarifying.

First, Smith is right to point out that the priorities of senior U.S. officials played an important role in sabotaging diplomacy with North Korea, but the more interesting question is why the United States would vacillate between being distracted and being in crisis. Much of that can be explained through a combination of bureaucratic politics and the ideological convictions of key players.

Before and during the 1994 nuclear crisis, for instance, the Clinton administration was slow to elevate the importance of the North Korean nuclear issue within the bureaucracy. As the crisis was brewing in 1993, Clinton was preoccupied with events in Somalia and Bosnia. And an internal battle between the State Department and the Office of the Secretary of Defense—with the former, surprisingly, preferring the harder line, maximalist demands of North Korea—was crucial in fueling what would become the 1994 crisis.⁶

Similarly, in the Bush administration, Vice President Dick Cheney’s direct interventions in the early diplomacy with North Korea undermined the State Department, tying the hands of lead U.S. negotiator James Kelly and preventing him from initially doing anything other than confronting North Korea with accusations of nuclear cheating. And in 2002, Bush speechwriter David Frum included North Korea in the famous “Axis of Evil” speech with “no indication of thought given to the potential impact.”⁷ North Korea has identified this speech as the point of no return for its nuclear program.⁸ Once Bush-era negotiations finally proceeded in earnest, bureaucratic preferences and ideology again become central to decision outcomes as influential officials like Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld persisted with hawkish policy arguments and accusing Condoleezza Rice (as Secretary of State) and Christopher Hill (as lead negotiator) of “appeasement.”⁹

Second, as part of the 1994 Agreed Framework, the United States committed to a schedule of delivering heavy fuel oil and furnishing the construction of light-water nuclear reactors, but fell short of North Korean expectations on both counts. Smith is not wrong to identify the structure of the U.S. government as a factor that made it difficult for the United States to live up to its end of the 1994 deal. But that explanation for poor U.S. implementation of the deal elides a more powerful, if politically charged, one: a hawkish Republican Congress that was opposed to deal-making with North Korea. The Republican-led Congress during the Clinton era refused to provide funding for the light-water reactor project that was part

⁵ Jackson, “Threat Consensus and Rapprochement Failure”; Jackson, *On the Brink*.

⁶ Joel Wit, Daniel Poneman, and Robert Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2004); Jackson, *On the Brink*, 28-29.

⁷ Smith, “Denuclearising North Korea,” 565.

⁸ Jackson, *On the Brink*, 56.

⁹ Smith, “Denuclearising North Korea,” 568.

of the 1994 deal and repeatedly imposed new sanctions on North Korea while both sides were trying to implement it, which sent deeply mixed signals about U.S. intentions and incentivized North Korean hedging on the deal by clandestinely developing a uranium enrichment path to the bomb.¹⁰ Republicans were also the primary force behind the embarrassing 1998 Kumchang-ri incident in which the United States accused North Korea of violating the Agreed Framework, North Korea denied the accusation, and then after lengthy negotiations and payments to North Korea the United States was able to finally deploy inspectors only to find no such evidence.¹¹

Smith does not deny Republican bad faith but focuses on the Clinton administration, which failed to make Congress a stakeholder in negotiations with North Korea. To be sure, this case presents a crucial lesson for future policymakers—get congressional buy-in or limit yourselves to deals that can be implemented without Congress. But given the hawkish (and anti-Clinton) preferences of Republican lawmakers, it is implausible to think that there was any version of a nuclear deal in 1994 that Congress would have faithfully implemented. As such, the Republicans themselves and their budding neoconservative thinking is a much more powerful and specific explanation for why U.S. implementation of the Agreed Framework was so erratic.

In the main, Smith's interpretation of history is correct. But its relevance, especially for policymakers, hinges on a presumption: If the Agreed Framework were faithfully implemented, and if the United States had fundamentally changed the valence of its relations with North Korea, the state would have denuclearized. That is perhaps the most contested claim in the Korea-watching community. The history of U.S.-North Korea relations is one of repeated missed opportunities.¹² Any argument that North Korea might have denuclearized in the past depends on identifying at least some of these many missed opportunities in history. But had those opportunities been seized, would they have made U.S. security assurances credible enough for North Korea to have made an existential gamble, giving away a capability it saw as regime insurance?

I would like to believe so, but theory and deductive reasoning leave little room for confidence. Logically, it is unclear how the United States could overcome the basic commitment problem of convincing a weaker adversary that it should allow itself to be vulnerable. Would North Korea really believe U.S. security assurances when threat perceptions of the United States are what drove them to pursue nuclear weapons in the first place? If I were Kim Jong-un, I would never take that risk. Reinforcing the point, recent research suggests that stronger states—and the United States in particular—have a hard time coercing weaker rivals because the stakes for the weaker state tend to be existential.¹³ The United States, in other words, tends to ask for what others cannot give. What is more, the U.S.-North Korea dynamic is a classic case of “Goliath’s Curse”—the dramatic power imbalance favoring the United States makes it almost impossible for U.S. officials to adequately price in the reputational costs North Korea thinks it faces by giving in to a much stronger rival’s demands.¹⁴ Accordingly, it is next to impossible for the United States to offer a bargain that would offset what North Korea would be giving up.

¹⁰ Jackson, “Threat Consensus and Rapprochement Failure.”

¹¹ The United States would discover later that North Korea was developing nuclear weapons in violation of the spirit of the Agreed Framework, but because it only covered plutonium (not uranium) enrichment, North Korean cheating did not technically violate the deal.

¹² For a summary of missed opportunities, see Catherine Killough, *Begun is Half Done: Prospects for US-North Korea Nuclear Diplomacy* (Washington, D.C.: Ploughshares Fund, 2019), 2-3.

¹³ Phil Haun, *Coercion, Survival, and War: Why Weak States Resist the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

¹⁴ Todd Sechser, “Goliath’s Curse: Coercive Threats and Asymmetric Power,” *International Organization* 64:4 (2010): 627-660.

All of this implies that no negotiating win-set is available within the demands both sides have historically established. Does that mean an irreducible conflict? Not if the United States is willing to curb its own ambitions. If North Korea will not unilaterally surrender its nuclear deterrent under any circumstances, then the United States should adjust its goals accordingly. Well-intentioned demands are not necessarily strategically sound or realistic demands. If the United States wants anything from North Korea other than threats and war, it needs to reckon with its own history of failed policy and take more seriously what North Korea seeks and how it is likely to respond to different kinds of overtures.

Smith's argument is a welcome addition to the chorus not because of the implicit claim that the United States could have prevented North Korea from going nuclear if only it had delivered the right carrots and sticks in the right way. We just do not know if that is true. Instead, his argument is valuable because his focus on U.S. shortcomings corrects the tendency to make the history of U.S.-North Korea relations about *what* North Korea has done wrong rather than *why* it has done wrong. Call that revisionist history if you like, but it is not bothsidesism.

Van Jackson, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in International Relations at Victoria University of Wellington, an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security, and the Defence & Strategy Fellow at the Centre for Strategic Studies: New Zealand. He is the author of *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). He served as a Pentagon strategist and policy adviser during the Obama administration (2009-2014), focused on Asia and North Korea.