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**The North Korean Threat:
Intelligence and Diplomacy —
A Personal Memoir**

Joseph R. DeTrani



NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

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A Personal Memoir**

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Korean and Chinese Names

- Choe Song-hui, North Korea's current Foreign Minister
- Chun Doo-hwan, South Korea's former President
- Cui Tiankai, China's former Ambassador to the United States and Deputy to Six-Party Talks
- Deng Xiaoping, former Chairman of China's Communist Party
- Fu Ying, China's former Ambassador to the United Kingdom and Deputy Chairman to Six-Party Talks
- Han Sung Ryol, North Korea's former Vice Foreign Minister
- Hua Guofeng, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party
- Jang Song-thaek, Kim Jong Un's Uncle and former Vice Chairman of the Korean Workers' Party
- Jang Su-gil, Deputy to Jang Song-thaek
- Jiang Zemin, China's former President
- Kang Sok-ju, North Korea's former First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Kim Dae Jung, South Korea's former President
- Kim il Sung, North Korea's former Chairman and Supreme Leader
- Kim Jong-il, son of Kim il Sung and former Chairman and Supreme Leader of North Korea
- Kim Jong Nam, half-brother of Kim Jong Un
- Kim Jong Un, son of Kim Jong-il and Chairman and Supreme Leader of North Korea
- Kim Kye-gwan, North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister
- Kim Yong-chol, North Korea's former Director of the Reconnaissance Bureau
- Kim Yong-nam, President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly
- Lee Myung-bak, President of South Korea
- Li Toe Gon, North Korea's Atomic Energy Chief
- Li Zhaoxing, China's Foreign Minister

- Lim Dong Won, South Korea's former Director of the National Intelligence Service
- Liu Shaoqi, China's former Vice Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party
- Moon Jae-in, South Korea's former President
- Ne Win, Burma's former Supreme Leader
- Ning Fukui, China's former Deputy Representative to Six-Party Talks
- Pak Gil Yun, North Korea's former Ambassador to the United Nations
- Ri Myong Je, father of Ri Yong ho, former minister of foreign affairs
- Ri Ryong-ha, Deputy to Jang Song-thaek
- Ri Yong ho, North Korea's former Minister of Foreign Affairs
- Ryu Gyang, North Korea's former Deputy Minister of State Security
- Tang Jiaxuan, China's former Minister of Foreign Affairs
- U Dong Chok, North Korea's former Minister of State Security
- Wang Yi, China's current Foreign Minister and Director of the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party
- Wu Dawei, China's former Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and representative for Six-Party Talks
- Yi Gun, North Korea's Deputy Representative to Six-Party Talks
- Yoon Suk Yeol, South Korea's current President

Introduction

We ignore North Korea at our own peril. The 70th anniversary of the Armistice in 1953 that ended the Korean War was a time to reflect. Can another Korean War – this time with nuclear weapons – that killed over 37,000 Americans and resulted in 7,000 still missing be prevented? Is reunification with a prosperous South Korea feasible, given the hostile rhetoric coming from North Korea? Is denuclearization of North Korea a realistic goal? Do we care about the tragic human rights situation for the 25 million people living in a brutal dictatorship? Should regime change be our goal?

I spent four decades working on the North Korean threat, first as an intelligence officer, then as a diplomat and lead negotiator for the United States and, finally, as a private citizen meeting North Korean officials. My exposure to North Korea in these unique roles gave me access to senior officials in the governing Workers' Party of Korea, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of State Security, and the Korean People's Army. I also worked closely with counterparts in South Korea, China and Japan responsible for managing the nuclear threat from North Korea.

Some of the officials I met in Pyongyang, during secret visits, gave me hope that North Korea could open up and reform, despite the skepticism of some in Washington and Seoul who believed that North Korea would never change. In the following chapters I talk about my meetings in Singapore with General Ryu Gyang, Deputy Minister of State Security, and arrangements we made for former President Bill Clinton to travel to Pyongyang to secure the release of the two women journalists – Laura Ling and Euna Lee – who illegally entered North Korea and were sentenced to 12 years of hard labor. Subsequently, I made secret visits to North Korea for meetings with Jang Song-

Thaek, the uncle of Kim Jong Un and the second most powerful official in North Korea, and General Kim Yong-chol, head of their intelligence organization and the principal organizer of the Donald Trump-Kim Jong Un summits, and other senior officials. The excellent meeting with Jang Song-Thaek and his offer to help improve relations stays with me to this day.

Jang Song-Thaek was brutally executed two years after our meeting and other senior officials I met and negotiated with eventually were either executed or disappeared, which continues to haunt me.

The Central Intelligence Agency and other elements of the U.S. Government reviewed this manuscript prior to publication to prevent the disclosure of classified information. All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official positions or views of the U.S. Government. Nothing in the contents should be construed as asserting or implying U.S. Government authentication of information or endorsement of the author's views.

Some Background

Currently, North Korea is an existential threat to South Korea, Japan, Northeast Asia and the United States. We are at a critical inflection point with a nuclear and belligerent North Korea. If we cannot peacefully resolve the nuclear issue with North Korea, which now seems unlikely, the possibility of nuclear or conventional conflict—intentional or accidental—on the Korean Peninsula and beyond is real. Also of concern is the likelihood that nuclear weapons and/or fissile material for dirty bombs can be sold or provided to rogue states or non-state terrorist organizations, for use against the United States or our allies and partners. In short, any of these scenarios would create

consequences that we haven't seen since the end of World War II.

The need for heightened vigilance and diplomacy in dealing with North Korea has never been greater. And, it has never been more important for the United States to maintain a close relationship with South Korea and Japan. China, which previously served as host of the Six-Party Talks with North Korea, can and should help with a belligerent North Korea, but hasn't, mainly due to tension with the United States. China has unique leverage with North Korea, given that North Korea's economic survival depends on China – over 90% of its trade and crude oil and petroleum products come from China.

North Korea wants a normal relationship with the United States and acceptance as a nuclear weapons state. It does not want to be tethered to a China that views it as a vassal state. North Korea's current leader, Kim Jong Un, was educated in Switzerland and, at the age of twenty-seven, inherited a North Korea with nascent nuclear capabilities and a failed economy, with over 40% of its people malnourished.¹

Some of the senior officials in North Korea who seemingly wanted political reform and a better relationship with the United States were executed or disappeared. And, as North Korea exponentially increased its nuclear weapons capabilities and persisted with its illicit activities, the response from the United States and its allies and partners has been inconsistent.

Kim's father, Kim Jong-il, wanted a normal relationship with the United States and acceptance as a nuclear weapons state. The Agreed Framework in 1994 halted all activity at North Korea's plutonium nuclear facility in Yongbyon, in

¹ "Over 40 pct of N. Koreans Undernourished: U.N. Report," *The Korea Times*, July 7, 2022, available at https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2023/11/103_332321.html.

return for the construction of two light water reactors, for civilian nuclear energy, and the provision of heavy fuel oil until such time as the reactors were operational.² This ended abruptly in 2002 when North Korea was confronted with U.S. knowledge of their clandestine Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program, for nuclear weapons. The Six-Party Talks from 2003-2009 produced a Joint Statement in September 2005 in which North Korea agreed to dismantle all nuclear weapons and facilities, in return for security assurances, economic development assistance and a path to normal relations.³ The Talks ended in 2009 when North Korea refused to permit nuclear monitors to leave the Yongbyon facility to inspect non-declared suspect nuclear sites, mainly suspect HEU sites. And it was this issue – Highly Enriched Uranium – that caused the Hanoi Summit of 2019 between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un to fail; Kim refused to include all his nuclear sites in his request to remove all sanctions imposed since 2016.⁴

Indeed, North Korea's clandestine HEU program, and its determination to have nuclear weapons, was responsible for the termination of the Agreed Framework of 1994-2002, the Six-Party Talks of 2003-2009, and the Trump-Kim summits in Singapore and Hanoi in 2018-2019. Currently, North Korea refuses to talk to the United States, while exponentially increasing its arsenal of nuclear weapons that

² "The Agreed Framework at a Glance," *Arms Control Association*, February 2022, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/agreedframework>.

³ "Six Party Talks, Beijing, China," *U.S. State Department*, September 19, 2005, available at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eap/regional/c15455.htm>.

⁴ Jung H. Pak, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly at the US-North Korea Summit in Hanoi," *Brookings Institution*, March 4, 2019, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-good-the-bad-and-the-ugly-at-the-us-north-korea-summit-in-hanoi/>.

can be mated to ballistic missiles and are capable of targeting South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

In 2022, North Korea launched over 100 ballistic missiles and, as of December 2023, North Korea launched 20 ballistic missiles, to include three Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs). The most recent ICBM was launched on December 18, 2023—a solid fuel, road mobile ICBM assessed to travel over 15,000 kilometers (9,320 miles), capable of targeting the entire United States.

At a Party Congress in 2022, Kim Jong Un announced that North Korea changed its doctrine on the use of nuclear weapons from deterrence to preemptive use of nuclear weapons, in response to an imminent or perceived imminent threat to the leadership or command and control.

Why We Should Care

North Korea, a hostile country that views the United States as an enemy, has nuclear weapons that can be mated to ballistic missiles capable of targeting the United States. Clearly, that is why we should care; that is why more must be done to ensure that this could never happen.

In 2022, North Korea's Kim Jong Un announced to his people and the world that North Korea would never give up its nuclear weapons, while declaring a nuclear preemptive first-use policy. On March 15, 2023, North Korea launched a road mobile Hwasong-17 ICBM reportedly capable of reaching distances as far as 15,000 kilometers. In April 2023, North Korea launched a solid fuel ICBM (Hwasong 18) capable of targeting the whole of the United States. Moreover, to ensure clarity in their message—that Pyongyang can target the United States with nuclear weapons—North Korea launched another solid fuel

ICBM on December 18, 2023, capable of targeting the entire United States.⁵

At a Party Congress in 2021, Kim Jong Un said the United States is North Korea's "biggest enemy" and threatened to exponentially expand North Korea's nuclear arsenal. Indeed, North Korea now has missiles that can target the whole of the United States with nuclear weapons. This reality requires immediate attention from the Biden Administration and all successor administrations.

Recent ICBM launches have also generated considerable concern in South Korea that U.S. extended nuclear deterrence commitments could become problematic, given that North Korea can now threaten the United States with nuclear weapons. Over 70% of the people in South Korea believe they should have their own nuclear weapons and not depend on U.S. extended nuclear deterrence assurances. North Korea's successful ICBM launches fuel this sentiment, with South Koreans now questioning whether the United States would be prepared to defend South Korea from an attack from the north, knowing North Korea could strike the United States with nuclear weapons.

In 2017, we came close to war with North Korea. A country with 25 million people, with over 40% of the population malnourished with systemic food scarcity, should not be a military threat to South Korea, Japan, Northeast Asia and the United States. Of course, this would be true if North Korea did not have nuclear weapons and missiles to deliver them, with an active chemical and biological program and cyber capabilities that took down Sony Pictures and banks in South Korea and Bangladesh. Within hours, using conventional weapons, North Korea could kill millions of people in Seoul, with a population of

⁵ Jack Kim, "North Korea says Hwasong-18 ICBM Test was response to U.S. Hostility," *Reuters*, December 18, 2023, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/north-korea-says-it-conducted-hwasong-18-icbm-monday-yonhap-2023-12-18/>.

10 million. Using tactical nuclear weapons, as North Korea said it is capable of doing, casualties and devastation would be horrific. North Korea has a history of aggression and human rights abuses, with a leadership in Pyongyang literally divorced from the outside world, with the exception of a long-term relationship with China and Russia. The leadership in Pyongyang is convinced that its survival depends on its nuclear and conventional weapons, and its record of unpredictable and threatening behavior.

In 2018, North Korea's new leader, Kim Jong Un, a young man who studied in Switzerland, the youngest son of Kim Jong-il, had reached out to South Korea and the United States, giving hope that this young leader, who inherited a country in dire economic shape, was willing to dismantle his country's nuclear and missile programs in exchange for a normal relationship with the United States and the international community. This hope ended in February 2019 at the Hanoi Summit, when Kim said he was prepared to dismantle elements of the Yongbyon plutonium nuclear facility in return for the lifting of all sanctions imposed since 2016. When Trump countered that all nuclear facilities, to include the HEU facilities, had to be included, Kim refused to budge from his original offer and the summit came to an abrupt end. This confirmed to many critics of Trump's summits with North Korea that Kim was never serious about complete and verifiable denuclearization.

Since then, North Korea has been in a race to build more nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, to include hypersonic and submarine-launched missiles, some theoretically capable of defeating missile defense systems. In response to this significant escalation from North Korea, the new South Korean conservative government of Yoon Suk Yeol requested that the United States upgrade its extended nuclear deterrence commitments and its annual joint military exercises. Yoon's visit to the United States in

April 2023 culminated in a Washington Declaration that provided South Korea with enhanced extended nuclear deterrence assurances, and established annual visits of nuclear-armed submarines and other strategic assets, and the establishment of a nuclear consultative group.⁶

North Korea's response to the successful summit of Presidents Biden and Yoon, with its emphasis on extended deterrence and substantive joint military exercises, was quick and expected, accusing the United States and South Korea of plans to invade North Korea to effect regime change. China was also critical of Yoon's visit to the United States and the establishment of the Washington Declaration that, according to Beijing, intensified tension on the Korean Peninsula.

The likelihood of intentional or accidental conflict on the Korean Peninsula, with a nuclear-armed North Korea that views South Korea and the United States as enemies, is greater now than at any time since the 1953 Armistice that ended combat during the Korean War. Moreover, the likelihood that North Korea would sell or provide a nuclear weapon, fissile material or nuclear know-how to a rogue state—as it did with Syria—or a terrorist organization should also be of concern.

Chapters 1-12 provide historical perspective on North Korea and its nuclear pursuits and criminal behavior and on my professional involvement with North Korea, as a negotiator representing the President and as an intelligence officer providing intelligence on North Korea to the Policy Community, Department of Defense and Law Enforcement.

Chapters 13-14 dive into North Korea's nuclear and missile proliferation, its strategic relationship with China and Russia and its illicit activities, to include a commentary on its human rights abuses.

⁶ "Yoon-Biden Summit," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 5, 2023, available at <https://www.cfr.org/blog/presidents-inbox-recap-biden-yoon-summit>.

Chapter One

Into the Abyss

I have been negotiating with North Korea since 2003. In 2000, when I was Chief of East Asia Operations at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Intelligence Community (IC) discovered North Korea's clandestine Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program and its role in the October 2002 visit of Assistant Secretary of State, James Kelly, to Pyongyang to discuss this and other issues.⁷ This experience and my earlier years working as Director William Casey's Executive Assistant, with other domestic and foreign assignments, helped prepare me for the upcoming years negotiating with North Korean counterparts and senior leaders like: Kim Jong Un's uncle and Vice Chairman of the Korean Workers' Party, Jang Song-thaek; General Kim Yong-chol, architect of the Trump-Kim summits and head of the Reconnaissance (Intelligence) Bureau; former Foreign Minister Ri Yong ho; current Foreign Minister Choe Song-hui, former Vice Foreign Ministers Han Sung Ryol and Kim Kye-gwan; Ambassador Yi Gun, Minister of State Security; U Dong Chok and his deputy, General Ryu Gyang and others. Some of these officials were publicly executed, others disappeared, while a select few got promotions. North Korea's leadership is brutal and ruthless, with one of the world's worst human rights records.

My first real exposure to North Korea was in 1976, where, assigned to Tehran, I was confronted by two North Korean officials driving an old black Mercedes, who tried to run over my wife and me in the parking lot of the Tehran Hilton Hotel after a diplomatic reception. Fortunately, we

⁷ Sharon Squassoni, "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons: Latest Developments," *CRS Report to Congress*, October 10, 2006, available at <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/nuke/RS21391.pdf>.

moved to safety just in time. I will never forget the look of anger on the face of the North Korean driver, who obviously knew we were Americans. That event stayed with me during 13 years of negotiations with North Korea, and during secret visits to Pyongyang, with no communications to the outside world.

Chapter Two

The Burmese Fallout

Before joining Director Casey as his Executive Assistant, I served in Asia. Burma is a beautiful country, wracked by vicious civil wars and, at that time, ruled by autocratic leader Ne Win. North Korea, like many other Asian and European countries, had an active embassy. I admired Burmese history, culture and strong Buddhist beliefs. So, when North Korea sent a commando squad to Rangoon on October 9, 1983 to kill the visiting South Korean president, Chun Doo-hwan and his delegation, it was a shock and wake-up call that the North Korea that invaded the South in July 1950 – for three bloody years of war, with hundreds of thousands of casualties – had not changed. President Chun survived the attack, due to reported mechanical difficulties and his late arrival, while 26 of his colleagues were killed and 46 were injured.⁸

This tragedy in Burma did not get the attention it deserved in Washington. It came after the April 18, 1983 terrorist bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon and the death of 32 Lebanese and 17 Americans, including Bob Ames, a senior officer of the CIA who was the Director of Near East Operations and a close adviser to Director Casey.⁹ This was a tragic and devastating loss of lives, and Casey and colleagues in the IC were shaken by this brazen

⁸ Jung Min-kyung, “Revisiting the 1983 Rangoon Bombing,” *The Korea Herald*, May 10, 2023, available at <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230510000577#:~:text=of%20the%20peninsula.-,On%20Oct.,Korea%2C%20it%20was%20later%20revealed.>

⁹ “The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames,” *The Wilson Center*, May 22, 2014, available at <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230510000577#:~:text=of%20the%20peninsula.-,On%20Oct.,Korea%2C%20it%20was%20later%20revealed.>

attack on our embassy. I believe it was the focus on this heinous event that diverted some attention away from North Korea's terrorist attack against the presidential delegation from South Korea. Indeed, the October 23, 1983 truck bombing of the barracks for U.S. and French peacekeeping monitors in Beirut – which killed 241 Marines and sailors – was a shock and led to the realization that more must be done to address the terrorist threat in the Middle East.¹⁰ The Marine barracks bombing, coming a few weeks after North Korea's commando raid in Burma, was perhaps another reason why there was insufficient attention devoted to North Korea's criminal behavior. Director Casey, who had a close and special relationship with President Reagan, was shaken by these brazen and deadly terrorist attacks and was determined to use all the resources available to the Intelligence Community to capture the terrorists responsible for these heinous attacks, and destroy the terrorist organizations orchestrating them. Indeed, the March 1984 kidnapping and subsequent torture and execution of CIA Station Chief William Buckley by Hezbollah had a profound effect on Casey, who subsequently doubled down to ensure that substantial Intelligence Community resources would be devoted to the terrorist threat in the Middle East.¹¹

These were devastating years for the United States in Beirut with the evolving terrorist threat to the United States and its allies and partners. During that time the United States was also focused on defeating the Soviet Union in

¹⁰ Sgt. Jamie Arzola, ed., "Marines," October 22, 2018, Marine Barracks Bombing at Beirut, Lebanon, available at <https://www.marines.mil/News/Marines-TV/videoid/634642/dvpTag/Beirut/>.

¹¹ John Waterbury, "Beirut Rules: The Murder of a CIA Station Chief and Hezbollah's War Against America," *Foreign Affairs*, February 12, 2019, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2019-02-12/beirut-rules-murder-cia-station-chief-and-hezbollahs-war-against>.

Afghanistan, and countering Soviet aggression globally, with a focus on providing support to the Solidarity movement in Poland.

Casey was a hands-on manager who came to the CIA in 1981 with the goal and determination to defeat the Soviet Union.¹² Casey had a special relationship with President Ronald Reagan and shared Reagan's view that the Soviet Union was an "evil empire" that had to be defeated. Despite what analysts at the CIA were saying about the likelihood the Soviets would prevail in Afghanistan, Casey was determined and convinced that they could be defeated in Afghanistan. And with that defeat, he believed, there would be pressure from within the Soviet Union for change. And that, also, was part of his strategy for defeating the Soviet Union—getting information to the people in the Soviet Union about the abuses of its leadership and developments in the world, especially including Russian casualties in Afghanistan. Casey focused lots of attention on working with China to monitor developments with Soviet strategic forces and getting China to provide the ammunition and weaponry needed to support the Mujahideen in their battle against the Soviet invaders. Eventually, the Mujahideen prevailed in Afghanistan and the Soviet Union imploded in 1991, too late for Casey to witness these historical events. He died in May 1987, leaving a strong legacy during his final years as Director of the CIA.

In many ways it was understandable why North Korea did not receive the international condemnation it deserved at this time as a terrorist state. The focus was on the Soviet Union and the terrorist threat in the Middle East. The Soviet evil empire did receive the attention it deserved and it was defeated.

¹² Gayle Lynds, "A *Spy Story: DCI William Casey*," February 22, 2018, available at <https://roguewomenwriters.com/a-spy-story-dci-william-casey/>.

Chapter Three

Reign of Terror

Over the ensuing years, North Korea never disappointed with its ability to shock. On November 29, 1987, Korean Air Flight 858 exploded in mid-air when two North Korean agents planted a bomb in the overhead bin in the passenger cabin. All 115 passengers and crew died.¹³ I was serving at CIA Headquarters at that time, as Director of the Office of Technical Services, collaborating with the South Korean Government on security issues in regard to the upcoming Seoul Olympics when we received this news. It was obvious that North Korea wanted to intimidate the athletes and spectators scheduled to attend the 1988 Winter Olympics in Seoul.

The Seoul Olympics moved forward and was a success, despite Pyongyang's blatant efforts to disrupt the event. Again, this came at a time when the Soviets were planning to leave Afghanistan, defeated by the Mujahideen, and a few years preceding the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union. That is where the attention was and, unfortunately, a brazen North Korea was still on the march, with its terrorist behavior and continued focus on acquiring nuclear weapons. North Korea was, however, added to the State Department list of terrorist states in 1988, following the 1987 bombing of Korean Air Flight 858.

On March 26, 2010 a North Korean submarine launched a torpedo in international waters; it sank the South Korean navy vessel Cheonan, a corvette gunboat, killing 46 seamen.

¹³ Danielle Haynes, "The Tale of KAL Flight 858, How Woman who Bombed it walks Free," *UPI*, January 24, 2020, available at https://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2020/01/24/The-tale-of-KAL-Flight-858-how-woman-who-bombed-it-walks-free/7101579813401/#:~:text=Kim%20Hyon%20Dhui%20recovered%20and,1988%20for%20the%20Summer%20Olympics.

An international investigation (experts from the United States, Australia, Britain and Sweden) was conducted and parts of the torpedo were recovered, with North Korean markings. The report concluded that the torpedo parts found “perfectly match” a torpedo type that the North was known to manufacture. Pyongyang defiantly denied involvement, threatening war if action was taken against them for the sinking.

I was Director of the National Counterproliferation Center at that time and was asked by the White House to visit Beijing to present the evidence collected that concluded North Korea was responsible for the sinking of the Cheonan. Beijing initially claimed to welcome the visit but, given the visit of a South Korean delegation, the timing was not convenient. As we went back and forth on a convenient date, it became obvious Beijing preferred not hearing the evidence that implicated North Korea. The visit never materialized.

A few months after the North’s attack on the Cheonan, in November 2010, North Korea fired dozens of artillery shells at the South Korean island of Yeonpyeong, killing two marines and injuring 17, with three civilians wounded. There was concern that this unprovoked attack from the North could lead to an accidental war between the two Koreas. The North Korea attack happened the same month North Korea showed visiting U.S. scientist Sig Hecker a new uranium enrichment facility at the Yongbyon nuclear complex. According to Hecker, the former Director of Lawrence Livermore Laboratories in New Mexico, who spoke with me after he returned to the United States, the uranium facility was new and impressive, with 2,000 spinning centrifuges.

Missile Launches and Illicit Activities

Despite the 1994 Agreed Framework halting North Korea's plutonium program at its Yongbyon nuclear facility, in return for the provision of two light water reactors for civilian energy and providing heavy fuel oil until the reactors were operational, North Korea continued to be provocative. On August 31, 1998, while serving in Beijing, North Korea launched a Taepodong-1 three-stage liquid fueled rocket, in an attempt to put a satellite in orbit.¹⁴ The rocket passed over Japan, with its second stage falling into the Pacific Ocean about 60 kilometers past Japan. This was a wake-up call to the United States and Japan; we were now convinced that this was just the beginning of Pyongyang's plan to establish a formidable missile capability, to reach Japan and eventually the United States.

There were considerable discussions about this in the United States. An important editorial on June 22, 2006 in the Washington Post by former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry and former Assistant Secretary of Defense Ash Carter was titled: "If Necessary, Strike and Destroy – North Korea Cannot Be Allowed to Test This Missile." This powerful op-ed said the North Korean Taepodong missile should be destroyed before it can be launched, stating: "Should the United States allow a country openly hostile to it and armed with nuclear weapons to perfect an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of delivering nuclear weapons to U.S. soil? We believe not. The Bush administration has unwisely ballyhooed the doctrine of 'preemption', which all previous presidents have sustained as an option rather than a dogma." These discussions about doing more to prevent North Korea from threatening its neighbors with missile

¹⁴ Sheryl Wudunn, "North Korea Fires Missile Over Japanese Territory," *The New York Times*, September 1, 1998, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/01/world/north-korea-fires-missile-over-japanese-territory.html>.

launches did not prevent North Korea from eventually building a formidable ballistic missile arsenal, now capable of reaching South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

So, in 2000 when I took over as Chief, East Asia at the CIA, I was determined to focus more attention on North Korea, a criminal state historically interested in acquiring a nuclear weapons capability and on the State Department list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. This was also a North Korea notorious for its human rights abuses and its infamous gulags that imprisoned tens of thousands of political prisoners. Indeed, North Korea's Songbun system classifies citizens, from birth, into three categories – core, wavering, and hostile – in addition to about 50 sub-classifications to determine if an individual is trusted with responsibilities and given opportunities or even receives adequate food. This caste system persists, in a so-called “socialist paradise.”

North Korea was expert at counterfeiting the U.S. 100 dollar note and U.S. brand cigarettes and pharmaceuticals. I was determined to focus more attention on these illicit activities, knowing that North Korea's nuclear and missile programs were an existential threat to South Korea and Japan – and potentially to the United States. And, although the 1994 Agreed Framework with North Korea halted its plutonium program at its Yongbyon nuclear site, in exchange for the aforementioned two light water reactors and heavy fuel oil shipments, I doubted that North Korea would voluntarily give up its nuclear weapons program or cease its illicit activities and human rights abuses. That meant we had to devote more time and resources to North Korea.

Chapter Four

Axis of Evil

Having dinner at a local Washington restaurant with the visiting Director of South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) on January 29, 2002, we watched and were surprised when President George W. Bush, in his State of the Union address, included North Korea, with Iraq and Iran, as part of the "Axis of Evil" – rogue states that harbored, financed and aided terrorists and sought weapons of mass destruction.¹⁵ This surprised me and our allies in South Korea, whose president, Kim Dae Jung, was seeking rapprochement with North Korea. Kim Dae Jung had visited North Korea in June 2000, the first South Korean president to visit the North for an historic first inter-Korean summit since the Korean War. Kim Dae Jung received the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2000 for his efforts to restore democracy in South Korea and improve relations with North Korea.¹⁶

The following month, February 2002, President Bush traveled to China – 30 years after former President Richard Nixon's historic trip to China – for meetings with President Jiang Zemin.¹⁷ The talks went well, focusing on counterterrorism and China's help in America's antiterrorism campaign and willingness to help the United States start a dialogue with North Korea. President Jiang

¹⁵ Andrew Glass, "President Bush Cites 'Axis of Evil'," *Politico*, January 29, 2002, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/01/world/north-korea-fires-missile-over-japanese-territory.html>.

¹⁶ Chung-in Moon, "The Kim Dae Jung Government's Peace Policy Toward North Korea, JSTOR," *Asian Perspective*, 2001, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704317>.

¹⁷ "U.S. China Stand Against Terrorism," George W. Bush White House Archives, October 19, 2001, available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704317>.

also announced that he would be visiting the United States. I was in Beijing during President Bush's visit and sensed, from the people I met, that the talks went very well, despite the problem in April 2001 when a Chinese J-8 interceptor jet collided in mid-air with a U.S. Navy EP-3 reconnaissance aircraft. The Chinese pilot died and the EP-3 was forced to land on Hainan, where the 24 crew members were detained for 10 days and then returned to the United States after a letter from Washington was issued saying the United States was "very sorry for the incident."¹⁸

Food Scarcity and the First Signs of Outreach

In the mid-to-late 1990s, North Korea had significant food shortages, with widespread starvation in the provinces. This period, called "the arduous march," reportedly had between one and three million people dying from starvation.¹⁹ There were reports of unrest in the military, with regional commanders resisting instructions from Pyongyang. It was a tense period for North Korea, with many in Washington thinking that regime change was inevitable. They were wrong.

In early 2002, the new Director of NIS, Lim Dong Won, a close confidant of former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung, who arranged and accompanied Kim to Pyongyang

¹⁸ Elisabeth Rosenthal With David E. Sanger "U.S. Plane in China After it Collides With Chinese Jet" *The New York Times*, April 2, 2001, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/02/world/us-plane-in-china-after-it-collides-with-chinese-jet.html>.

¹⁹ "How Did the North Korean Famine Happen," *Wilson Center*, April 30, 2022, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/how-did-the-north-korean-famine-happen#:~:text=Famines%20take%20place%20under%20centralized,as%20the%20government%20still%20maintains.>

for his historic June 2000 summit with Kim Jong-il, told me that Kim Jong-il wanted him to pass a message to the United States, welcoming the visit of a senior U.S. official to discuss options for improving relations. Lim said he was pleasantly surprised with this message from Kim Jong-il and hoped the United States would send a delegation to Pyongyang soonest.

I shared this message with my counterpart at the State Department, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, a former naval officer expert on East Asia and a close adviser to Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, and Secretary of State, General Colin Powell. I also mentioned this to the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, George Tenet.

A Principals Committee meeting of the National Security Council—a Cabinet-level interagency forum—was convened to discuss North Korea and the message NIS Director Lim passed to me. I accompanied Tenet to the meeting, chaired by Vice President Dick Cheney, with Secretary Powell and Deputy Secretary Armitage and others present. Powell asked that I brief the Committee on the message I received from Director Lim and also asked that I make a recommendation on who should visit Pyongyang to engage with North Korea. I provided the particulars and suggested that Assistant Kelly should visit, with a small delegation, to discuss options for improving relations. Once that was established, a more general discussion ensued, dealing with the North's missile program and illicit activities. However, I did not mention North Korea's clandestine Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program, given that the Intelligence Community was still analyzing the considerable amount of intelligence we acquired about their secret program. Indeed, it was not until September, when the analytical work was completed and work commenced on producing a National Intelligence

Estimate on North Korea's clandestine HEU program, that the focus was on North Korea's HEU program.

In September, prior to Kelly's October visit to Pyongyang, I received, as Chief of East Asia Operations, verifiable intelligence—and the expert analysis of this intelligence—that North Korea had a clandestine HEU program for nuclear weapons. I shared this with Assistant Secretary Kelly and immediately got a call from his boss, Deputy Secretary of State Armitage, asking for an update and assurances that the information was accurate. Kelly and Armitage were former naval officers and good friends. I told Armitage the information was solid. He and Kelly, both highly regarded professionals, accepted it. This, then, became one of Kelly's talking points for his October 2002 trip to Pyongyang.

Chapter Five

Clandestine Uranium Enrichment Program

Kelly's October trip to Pyongyang did not go well. During his first day of discussions with his principal interlocutor, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Kim Kye-gwan, Kelly mentioned, in addition to other comments about U.S. interest in improving relations, information received about North Korea's HEU Program. Kim smiled and did not respond. On the second day, Kelly met Kim's boss, First Vice Minister Kang Sok-ju, who told Kelly that North Korea had the HEU and other programs and rhetorically asked what the United States was going to do about it. Hearing this, Kelly accidentally knocked over his glass of water and ended the meeting. Kelly called me on a secure line from the British Embassy in Pyongyang to mention what happened, which was unexpected, since I and others thought the North Koreans would simply deny having the HEU program. The U.S. position on the HEU program was clear: It was in violation of the 1992 North-South Agreement that neither country (South and North Korea) would reprocess spent fuel rods for plutonium or enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. It also violated the spirit of the 1994 Agreed Framework that committed North Korea to a halt in its pursuit of nuclear weapons.²⁰

Immediately after these meetings in Pyongyang, the United States stopped shipping heavy fuel oil to North Korea and suspended construction of the two light water reactors at Kumho, North Korea. Simultaneously, North Korea formally quit the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the only country to cease membership in this

²⁰ "North Korean Nuclear Program," *U.S. State Department*, October 16, 2002, available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2002/14432.htm>.

organization. A few months later, my predecessor as Special Envoy, Jack Pritchard, was told by his North Korean counterpart in New York, at their Mission to the United Nations, that North Korea had removed (from a cooling pond) and commenced with the reprocessing of the 8,017 spent fuel rods, for weapons grade plutonium at their Yongbyon nuclear facility.

Overhead imagery confirmed that North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility was activated and North Korea was doing what it told Pritchard—reprocessing spent fuel rods for the plutonium needed for nuclear weapons. Secretary of State Colin Powell contacted his Chinese counterpart, Minister Tang Jiaxuan, and requested China's assistance in getting North Korea to enter into negotiations, which China was successful in doing. This, then, was the establishment of the Six-Party Talks, with North Korea, China, Russia, South Korea, Japan and the United States. China agreed to host these talks in Beijing, with Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi as the Chairperson, and Ambassador Fu Ying, his deputy. The first Plenary Session of the Six-Party Talks was in August 2003 with Kelly in the chair for the United States and First Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan representing North Korea. The initial North Korean position called for a normalization of relations and a non-aggression pact with the United States, without which Pyongyang maintained a dismantling of its nuclear program would be out of the question. The United States rejected a non-aggression pact, which precluded any progress during the first Plenary session. The Plenary session chairperson, Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi, mentioned six points of consensus, to include: A commitment to resolve the nuclear issue through peaceful means and dialogue; pursuing a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, while bearing in mind the security of North Korea; and, avoiding acts that would aggravate the situation further.

Negotiating with North Korea

In October 2003, I joined the State Department as the new Special Envoy for Negotiations with North Korea. I had spent many years working with colleagues at State, and when Deputy Secretary Armitage offered me the job, mainly due to my knowledge of the region and years of work in China and fluency in Chinese, I immediately accepted. Working with Armitage, Secretary Powell and Kelly was an honor.

Although there was no breakthrough at the first Plenary session in August, arrangements were made for the second Plenary in February 2004. Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi (China's current Politburo member, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Foreign Affairs Commission) was an active and engaged chairman of these talks. Plenary and Working Group sessions were in Beijing's Diaoyutai state guest house, the same guest house used by President Richard Nixon during his historic visit to China in 1972. There was legitimate concern as we met that North Korea, the only country to quit the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), was in fact building nuclear weapons.

What I immediately realized upon joining the State Department was that there was no official consensus on how to deal with North Korea. The National Security Council (NSC), with Vice President Cheney and his staff in the lead, took a hard line with North Korea. In fact, during the first Principals Committee meeting I attended, via secure video from State Department with Secretary Powell, Deputy Armitage, and Assistant Secretary Kelly, it became clear that State Department and the NSC had starkly divergent views on North Korea. We were told that Complete, Verifiable, Irreversible Dismantlement (CVID) of all nuclear weapons and facilities was mandatory and that

North Korea would never be permitted to have civilian nuclear energy, because they could not be trusted with anything nuclear. We noted that the NPT requires nuclear weapons states to provide nuclear material support for civilian nuclear energy purposes to non-nuclear weapons states; thus, how can we deny North Korea the ability to have civilian nuclear energy?

This tension between the State Department and the NSC persisted through the period of our negotiations. In fact, there was tension even within the State Department, with Undersecretary John Bolton taking a hard position on North Korea and insisting that the negotiators marched to his tune. Bolton had his officers attend all plenary and working group sessions, taking notes and ensuring that the negotiators and their staff did not have any private or social contact with the North Koreans. This was unpleasant for Kelly and his team, whose actions were being monitored closely. I thought the constraints on the negotiators were counterproductive, if we were expected to prevail in our negotiations with North Korea. I was determined to negotiate in good faith, knowing that CVID was our objective. However, putting unreasonable constraints on the negotiators to accomplish this mission was distasteful and counterproductive, reminding me of the autocratic countries I served in and the groupthink it engendered. I was determined to succeed as a negotiator, with the requisite operational freedom necessary to accomplish the mission.

I remember one particular Working Group meeting in Beijing when I mentioned the United States was prepared to offer “negative security assurances” (would not attack or invade) to North Korea if and when it returned to Plenary session negotiations to peacefully resolve the nuclear issue with North Korea. After returning to the United States, there were some media reports stating that I offered North Korea these assurances which, the articles said, went way

beyond my talking points. I asked but never discovered who leaked this information to the press. But it was a reminder that I had monitors secretly reporting on what I said and to whom, even in one-on-one exploratory sessions. I knew this upset Kelly during our three Plenary sessions. It also upset me, but it didn't deter us from being creative as we pursued our goal of complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization.

I had asked Wang Yi to provide us with a room at the State Guest House for private sessions with our North Korean counterparts, similar to what we did with counterparts from the other four countries. Wang Yi appeared pleased with this request and a room was provided for these candid exchanges. mindful that our Chinese host was recording every word.

I was Kelly's deputy at the formal plenary sessions in Beijing but, as the special envoy, I had the responsibility for ensuring that we had a whole-of-government approach for monitoring and dealing with North Korea. Initially, and throughout the Six-Party Talks negotiations process, I spent considerable time with our Treasury Department colleagues. The focus was on using sanctions as a tool to use when North Korea was caught dealing in illicit activities. The National Security Council (NSC), with David Shedd in the lead as the Senior Director for Intelligence, and Juan Zarate, a senior officer at Treasury, taking the lead for Treasury, convened numerous meetings at the NSC to discuss North Korea and its criminal behavior, and options available for dealing with this behavior. Our Treasury colleagues educated all of us on the utility of sanctions and how sanctions could be used against the North, in response to its counterfeiting of the U.S. 100 dollar note and cigarettes, trafficking in drugs, and counterfeit pharmaceuticals, like Viagra. North Korea made millions of dollars from its illicit business, usually conducted from its embassies and offices around the world. The money was

used primarily to enrich the leadership and pay for its nuclear and missile programs. None of this illegally acquired money was used to improve the lives of the people, suffering from food scarcity and an antiquated health care system.

Considerable time was spent discussing and coordinating issues with the other four member countries of the Six-Party Talks – China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia. Working Group meetings were convened in Beijing, while also working bilaterally with each of the four countries involved in the Talks. Considerable time was spent in New York with the North Korean Mission to the United Nations. My initial interlocutor was North Korean Ambassador Pak Gil Yun, North Korea's Ambassador to the United Nations. He was assisted by Ambassador Han Sung Ryol, who was the designated point of contact for relations with the United States. Han would attend and take notes during my meetings with Pak, who usually read his talking points from Pyongyang. Both men were polite and very professional. On one occasion, the three of us decided to have our meeting at the Waldorf Astoria's Bull and Bear Restaurant, with a bottle of wine to facilitate the dialogue. Eventually, Pak deferred meetings to Han, obviously comfortable with Han's ability to handle this special New York Channel.²¹

My meetings with Pak and Han were monitored closely by the FBI. I would inform the Bureau of my meetings, knowing that they monitored the comings and goings of people who visit with the North Korea Mission to the United Nations. I did not want the Bureau expending valuable manpower on my meetings with North Korea in

²¹ Josh Rogin, "Inside the New York Channel Between the United States and North Korea," *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2017, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/josh-rogin/wp/2017/08/11/inside-the-new-york-channel-between-the-united-states-and-north-korea/>.

New York, aware they could have access to the notes from each of these encounters—and there were many. Occasionally, I would meet in a nearby hotel with Han, knowing that, in addition to the Bureau, journalists and others would be monitoring the North Korean Mission. I got to know Han and respected his professionalism. He was always polite but candid in our one-on-one discussions. His English was excellent and he appeared comfortable living in New York. He was fortunate to have his family with him, living on Roosevelt Island in New York where most of the North Koreans lived. When I left the State Department in 2006 to join the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), I ceased having any contact with him. It was a pleasure in October 2016 when I again met with Han in Kuala Lumpur when he, as a Vice Foreign Minister, was the senior officer in a Track 1.5 meeting.

I routinely also met privately with counterparts from South Korea, Japan and China. Given China's allied relationship with North Korea, I spent considerable time in Beijing and Washington talking to those Chinese officials responsible for negotiations with North Korea: Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his deputy, Ambassador Fu Ying; Ambassador Ning Fukui, my counterpart; and, Ambassador Cui Tiankai and Wu Dawei who eventually replaced Wang Yi as the Special Representative for Korean Peninsula Affairs. All of these officials worked hard to make the Six-Party Talks successful.

Chapter Six

First Signs of Progress

In June of 2004, all parties, after many months of Working Group preparatory sessions and following the second Plenary session, a Chairman's statement that reaffirmed all six countries' commitment to a nuclear-weapons free Korean peninsula, agreed on a joint statement ending North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. The language of this joint statement was meticulously crafted, with all agreeing that we should get approvals from the leadership in the various capitals and, once approved, there would be no changes. A signing ceremony was scheduled for the following day, with a Friday morning ceremony, with China's Foreign Minister, Li Zhaoxing, and the local and foreign press in attendance. That evening, we had interrupted Secretary Powell at a black tie dinner in Washington to leave the event and approve the draft joint statement. Powell approved the statement after speaking with China's Foreign Minister Li.

On the morning of the ceremony, the North Korean deputy, Ambassador Yi Gun, told the Chinese that Pyongyang wanted to change a few words that he said did not affect the substance. Chinese Ambassador Ning Fukui, my Chinese counterpart, approached me with this request and I reminded him that all agreed that not even one word would be changed, once approved in the various capitals. China and North Korea persisted, saying Pyongyang wanted to change a few words, not the substance. I said we had an agreement and the United States would not agree to the change. I informed Kelly and he agreed. The signing ceremony was canceled and the press and foreign minister were so informed. We had an unceremonious Chairman's Statement rather than a joint statement, with a very disappointed Chinese host. We eventually did get a joint statement resolving issues with North Korea, signed on

September 19, 2005 – one year later. Was my insistence on principle worth it? We lost one year, on principle.

I often thought how ironic it was that in 2002, I provided Kelly and the State Department with the Intelligence Community assessment that North Korea had a clandestine HEU program for nuclear weapons and then, in 2003, I had to convince North Korea to admit to this program, which they denied having – after admitting to Kelly a few months earlier that they had this program. North Korea’s negotiators repeatedly (probably because they did not know) said North Korea did not have a HEU program and the United States had it wrong, as we did with Iraq when Baghdad was accused of having a nuclear weapons program that did not exist. No matter how I tried, North Korea would not budge; Pyongyang insisted that it did not have such a program. (In 2010, North Korea finally admitted to a uranium enrichment program, when it took Sig Hecker, former Director of Los Alamos Labs, to see a sophisticated uranium enrichment site at its Yongbyon nuclear facility, in a building with 2,000 spinning centrifuges).

In March 2005, I was formally appointed by George W. Bush and confirmed by the U.S. Senate as Ambassador to continue in my efforts to negotiate on behalf of the United States during the Six-Party Talks.

A Nuclear Agreement for the Peninsula

On September 19, 2005, at the fourth Plenary session of the Six-Party Talks, we finally got a Joint Statement committing North Korea to complete and verifiable dismantlement of all nuclear weapons and operating nuclear facilities, in exchange for security assurances, a path to normal relations with the United States and economic development assistance. Originally, the United States favored using the words “highly enriched uranium” in this Joint Statement,

saying "... all nuclear weapons and operating facilities to include the Highly Enriched Uranium sites..." North Korea refused to accept the mention of highly enriched uranium, arguing that "...all nuclear weapons and operating nuclear facilities..." was sufficiently comprehensive. Wu Dawei had replaced Wang Yi as China's Special Representative for the Six-Party Talks and he encouraged the U.S. delegation, headed by Ambassador Chris Hill, who replaced Jim Kelly as State Department's new A/S East Asia, to accept North Korea's language. Hill conferred with the new Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and both agreed to accept North Korea's proposed language.²²

On the same day we signed this joint statement, the Federal Registry noted that a Macau Bank, Banco Delta Asia (BDA), was sanctioned by the Treasury Department, pursuant to the Patriot Act section 215, on money laundering involving North Korea. In response, BDA then froze North Korea's \$25 million deposited at the bank. Treasury's sanctioning of BDA was one of the subjects discussed at previous NSC meetings dealing with North Korea. The strategic use of sanctions, in this case against North Korea's illicit activities, was and continues to be an effective response to North Korea's criminal and reckless behavior. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) uses sanctions as a tool to prevent North Korea from flagrantly violating UNSC resolutions dealing with North Korea's missile launches and nuclear tests. Previously, China and Russia, as permanent members of the UNSC, supported the imposition of these sanctions on North Korea for these blatant violations of UNSC resolutions. Indeed, this was the case in 2016 when China and Russia voted in favor of severe sanctions imposed on North Korea for its three nuclear tests (two in 2016 and one in 2017) and ICBM

²² State Department, Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks, September 19, 2005, available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/53490.htm>.

launches, all in violation of UNSC resolutions. Since the failed Hanoi Summit in 2019, however, China and Russia ceased supporting the imposition of sanctions on North Korea, regardless of North Korea's reckless behavior. And, as permanent members of the UNSC, a veto by any of the five members of the Security Council—the United States, United Kingdom, France, China and Russia—will defeat passage of any resolution. Thus, the United Nations is literally helpless in its efforts to curb and sanction North Korea for its nuclear tests and missile launches, all in violation of UNSC resolutions.

When I met with the North Koreans in Beijing in November 2005 to discuss implementation of the September 2005 Joint Statement, North Korean Ambassador Yi Gun, my counterpart in the Six-Party talks, privately mentioned to me that there must have been a misunderstanding and mistake, because BDA had frozen \$25 million of its money, saying BDA told North Korea that the United States instructed the bank to take this action. I told Yi Gun that it was not a mistake, explaining that this was a law enforcement decision by the Treasury Department; it had nothing to do with our negotiations and the Joint Statement. Yi Gun disagreed, saying the United States conspired to fool North Korea, claiming that some of the frozen \$25 million was money acquired legally. I informed Yi Gun that commingling good with bad money was unfortunate, because it contaminated all of the money. An angry Yi Gun said North Korea would now reconsider its commitments in the Joint Statement.

True to his word, the following year (2006) North Korea did indeed go ballistic, a normal occurrence when North Korea is angry because Pyongyang did not get its way. It launched a long-range Taepodong-2 missile and six shorter-range missiles on July 6, 2006 and had its first nuclear test on October 9, 2006. I had left the State Department in early 2006 and took on a new position with the recently

established Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI). Ambassador John Negroponte, who was appointed by President Bush to be the first DNI, asked me to be an Associate DNI responsible for North Korea, overseeing the work of the 16 agencies of the Intelligence Community (IC) on North Korea, to ensure that there would be no surprises from North Korea. I was in that new position a few months when North Korea literally went ballistic with their missile launches and nuclear test in 2006. I took some justifiable criticism from the DOD, saying the IC missed a few of the short-range missiles launched at Kittaeryong.

Arrangements were made by the Department of State for BDA to unfreeze North Korea's \$25 million, thus making it available to the North. Since no private bank wanted to be involved in the movement of this money to Pyongyang, the Federal Reserve Bank in New York handled the transaction, sending a clear message to all international financial institutions that it was now fine to do business with North Korea and BDA. This pleased North Korea. They returned to negotiations for the implementation of the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement.

Chapter Seven

Creation of the ODNI

I left the State Department and the Special Envoy job to join Ambassador John Negroponte who, at the request of President George W. Bush, established the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) in 2005, responsible for overseeing the sixteen agencies in the Intelligence Community (IC). Negroponte was the first DNI and I was its first Mission Manager for North Korea, as an Associate DNI, responsible for the IC's work on North Korea.²³

Having left the State Department in early 2006 for an Associate DNI position responsible for the IC's work on North Korea, I represented the IC at meetings at the White House dealing with North Korea, usually in what are called Principals or Deputies Committee meetings. These are chaired by the president or vice president or national security adviser, and provide updates on North Korea—its nuclear and missile and illicit activities, and its relationship primarily with China. When I look back, I realize that I very seldom briefed our leadership on the human rights situation in North Korea. Yes, my IC colleagues and I talked about food scarcity and the decrepit health care system, but very little on the gulags, public executions, and the plight of the people. Indeed, I did not remember many questions dealing with the human rights situation in North Korea.

What I do remember was the skepticism in the media about the IC's assessment that North Korea had a clandestine HEU program. This disclosure put in jeopardy the 1994 Agreed Framework and, in 2009, contributed to the unraveling of the Six-Party Talks—and eventually the

²³ National Security Archive, From Director of Central Intelligence to Director of National Intelligence, December 17, 2004, available at <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB144/index.htm>.

Hanoi Summit in 2019. The media wanted more proof and assurances that the IC was correct: that North Korea, despite its protestations, did in fact have a clandestine nuclear weapons program. It was clear to me that North Korea wanted to normalize relations with the United States soonest, while pursuing HEU for nuclear weapons. And, when the United States discovered that North Korea in fact had an HEU program for nuclear weapons, it would be too late for the United States. And, as I was told often by the North Koreans, we would then accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and treat it the way we treated Pakistan.

As with Jim Kelly, I worked closely with A/S Christopher Hill. In 2007 and 2008, Hill and Ambassador Sung Kim, who replaced me as Special Envoy, were able to get North Korea to permit nuclear monitors to enter the Yongbyon plutonium site for eventual dismantlement. In fact, North Korea revealed to the world its destruction of the reactor's cooling tower and provided Hill and Kim with hundreds of pages documenting the work of the reactor and the fissile material it produced; this would be used by the United States to verify the complete dismantlement of its weapons and facilities.

In the spirit of 'trust but verify,' Hill had asked his counterpart, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan, to sign a verification protocol to permit International Atomic Energy Agency monitors to visit undeclared suspect nuclear sites. Kim refused to sign the protocol. On April 14, 2009, North Korea announced that it was leaving the Six-Party Talks, after the United Nations Security Council issued a Presidential Statement on April 13, condemning North Korea for attempting to put a satellite in orbit. North Korea then proceeded to expel all nuclear monitors, stating

that it would resume its nuclear enrichment program and enhance its nuclear deterrent.²⁴

Rescue of the Journalists from North Korea

In April 2009, the White House asked me to meet with the North Koreans to secure the release of two U.S. women journalists in prison in North Korea. In March 2009, North Korea arrested Euna Lee and Laura Ling, who were working for the U.S.-based independent television station Current TV, owned by former Vice President Al Gore. They crossed into North Korea without a visa and were found guilty of illegal entry and sentenced to 12 years of hard labor.²⁵

For the next three months I had a series of secret meetings in Singapore with Deputy Minister of State Security, General Ryu Gyang and his staff to secure the release of the two U.S. journalists. General Ryu was known as the “young general,” given his relative youth (reportedly born in 1959) and senior position in the Ministry of State Security (MSS). He was reputed to be a formidable negotiator. North Korea requested that the meetings be in Singapore, where they had an embassy and did not need a visa to visit. I arrived in Singapore for the first meeting with the North Koreans on April 5, at an agreed time and place, only to discover, in conversation with a colleague in Washington, that North Korea was scheduled to launch a rocket to put a satellite in orbit on the same day of our meeting. I was not too surprised with this news, having

²⁴ Kelsey Davenport, “The Six Party Talks at a Glance,” *The Arms Control Association*, January 2022, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>.

²⁵ Mark Landler and Peter Baker, “In Release of Journalists, Both Clintons Had Key Roles,” *The New York Times*, August 4, 2009, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/05/world/asia/05korea.html>.

experienced North Korea's penchant for launching missiles just prior to Plenary sessions of the Six-Party Talks. In many ways, this was North Korea's way of saying it is a sovereign country and, regardless of United Nations Security Council resolutions prohibiting the North from launching ballistic missiles, it has a sovereign right to put a satellite in orbit, similar to all other countries. The Kwangmyongsong-2 satellite launch failed, with the rocket and its payload falling into the Pacific Ocean.

The first meeting, at a conference room in a local hotel, was disappointing. General Ryu did not show, although his deputy and four other officers were in attendance. This was my first meeting with the MSS; we spent the afternoon with introductions and arranging for the next meeting with General Ryu. Feeling their initial unease, I sensed that this was the first time these MSS officers met with a U.S. official. General Ryu attended the two subsequent meetings, spending two days for each of these sessions, with hours of discussion concerning North Korea's claim that the journalists violated its law and that only President Kim Jong-il could pardon them, given the right circumstances. And that is what I was there to do—arrange for the release of these two Americans, negotiating the so-called right circumstances.

In contrast to his MSS colleagues, Ryu came across as a self-confident senior official who had experience meeting foreigners. He dressed well and, using an interpreter, was direct but polite.

I met with General Ryu the following month, spending hours hearing him talk about the crimes committed by the journalists and a penal system that only permitted Chairman Kim Jong-il to pardon the journalists, who were guilty of illegal entry into North Korea and sentenced to 12 years of hard labor. I had assurances from Ryu that the journalists were being treated well and North Korea was prepared to discuss options for dealing with their possible

release. During discussions, I asked that the journalists be released, and suggested that former Vice President Al Gore come to Pyongyang to secure their release and return to the United States. After much discussion, Ryu said North Korea would consider releasing the journalists to former President Bill Clinton. We went back and forth on this and did not come to any agreement. Thus, the first meeting with Ryu failed to come to any agreement on the release of the journalists. During these meetings, the general made it clear that if eventually his talks with me were unsuccessful, it would be a major setback professionally for him, with the potential for dire consequences when he returned to Pyongyang. We returned to our respective countries, agreeing to meet in a few weeks, at a given time and location.

North Korea's proposal to have Clinton visit Pyongyang to secure the release of the two journalists was then discussed at Cabinet meetings of the National Security Council. I provided the particulars at these meetings, followed by much discussion. Understandably, there was lots of skepticism and concern about having former President Clinton visit North Korea as a private citizen on his own plane, with only the word of Ryu that he would be treated respectfully, as a former president. I said I had assurances that Clinton and his team would be secure and treated with great respect. Many in the Situation Room disputed that, but I said I believed it. Fortunately, I had the support of the Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, who agreed to a Clinton visit to Pyongyang to secure the release and return of the two journalists.

My follow-on meeting with Ryu went smoothly. I said the United States agreed to North Korea's request that former President Clinton visit Pyongyang for the release and return of the two journalists. I stated that Clinton would be traveling to Pyongyang as a private citizen, using

a private plane, emphasizing that he would not spend more than 24 hours on the ground in North Korea and, per Ryu's request, would meet and have dinner with Chairman Kim Jong-il.

Clinton was briefed at his townhouse residence in Washington D.C., on the arrangements for his trip to Pyongyang to secure the release of the two journalists. Secretary Hillary Clinton arranged for this briefing of Clinton and graciously provided sandwiches to the participants. State Department's new A/S East Asia, Kurt Campbell, briefed Clinton, requesting that Clinton restrict his comments to the release of the two Americans and not discuss any other issue, to include nuclear-related issues. He was also advised to refrain from smiling, especially when pictures were taken with Kim Jong-il and others. And, he was definitely not to attend an Arirang Festival (gymnastic performance in the May Day stadium in Pyongyang), as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had done in October 2000, when she visited North Korea and had meetings with Kim Jong-il. Clinton patiently took the briefing, asking about the health and status of the two American journalists. He said he would personally make arrangements to fly in a private aircraft to Pyongyang, with his personal physician, an adviser, and a security detail.

Clinton's visit to Pyongyang went according to schedule. I was on the phone with North Korean counterparts throughout his visit, ensuring nothing untoward happened and that he would leave with the two journalists after 24 hours, following dinner with Kim Jong-il. Kim did invite Clinton to an Arirang performance, but Clinton repeatedly ignored the oral invitation from Kim, who then instructed his interpreter to forget doing the translation inviting him. It was clear to Kim that Clinton was not interested in attending an Arirang performance. During the visit, John Podesta, who accompanied Clinton,

had a required protocol visit with Kim Yong-nam, President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly. During that mandatory session, Kim made it clear, among other things, that North Korea had a sovereign right to put a satellite in orbit, and no country could deny it this sovereign right. This was the issue that caused the Leap Day Agreement of February 29, 2012 to fail, when Kim Jong Un, despite an agreement with the United States to abide by a moratorium on nuclear tests and missile launches, in return for food aid, persisted with launching a rocket that put a satellite in orbit on April 15, 2012, the centennial of the birth of Kim il Sung. This killed the Leap Day Agreement. On May 31, 2023, North Korea again launched a rocket to put a reconnaissance satellite in orbit; the launch was a failure.

Clinton's 24 hours on the ground went well. The two journalists, to their surprise, were told during their detention in a local hotel that former President Clinton was in Pyongyang to secure their release and return to the United States. And, Clinton did the necessary, meeting and having dinner with Kim Jong-il and refraining from talking about the North's nuclear program or the poor state of bilateral relations.

North Korea did what Ryu told me it would do: Treat Clinton with respect, restrict the visit to 24 hours on the ground, and return to the United States with the journalists.

I received a letter from former Vice President Al Gore, dated August 6, 2009 that read:

Dear Joe: Thank you for your tremendously skillful and effective work on behalf of Laura Ling and Euna Lee. I fully understand the role you played, and the intensity of your effort. If you watched their reunion with their families, you witnessed the restoration of many lives in addition to their own. You also know that 'only in America'

would it have happened. With deep appreciations, Al Gore

When I visited Pyongyang in January 2011 on a separate discrete mission, arranged with its Ministry of State Security, I asked to meet with General Ryu Gyang. I was told he was traveling and unavailable. I eventually discovered why Ryu was not available—he reportedly was executed.

Chapter Eight

Secret Trips to North Korea

In 2010, I left the North Korea Mission Manager job to be the new Director of the National Counterproliferation Center (NCPC). The NCPC had a modest staff of over 60 officers – in comparison with over 400 personnel in the National Counterterrorism Center, the only other center established under the new ODNI – and oversaw the Intelligence Community’s work on nuclear, chemical and biological nonproliferation and counterproliferation, with a focus on Russia, China, North Korea and Iran.

In early January 2011, the Obama Administration asked me to arrange a secret visit to Pyongyang to meet with senior officials to discuss resuming negotiations with the United States and educating them on our knowledge of their Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program for nuclear weapons. My instructions were to impress upon North Korea’s senior leadership the importance of including the HEU program in all future negotiations with the United States and to ensure that North Korea refrains from selling conventional or nuclear weapons and/or nuclear materials or know-how to another country or terrorist organization.

Using the same telephone number I had for the Ministry of State Security (MSS) that was used to arrange meetings with MSS Deputy Minister General Ryu Gyang for the release of the two American journalists, I eventually made contact with the MSS. As in the past, the MSS initially did not answer the phone but, when I finally got through, I was able to make arrangements for my visit to Pyongyang. So, on January 28, 2011, I took commercial flights to Pyongyang, transiting Beijing International Airport, where I then boarded a North Korean Air Koryo flight to Pyongyang. To my pleasant surprise, transiting Beijing International Airport went smoothly. I sensed that the

airport's customs and immigration staff were instructed to ensure that I connected with my scheduled Air Koryo flight.

The North Korean passengers, who appeared to be mostly workers and a few government officials, all carried parcels, some small and some large, apparently merchandise they purchased in China. It was a somber looking group of mostly males. Even on the flight, there was minimal conversation between the passengers. There was one other foreigner on the flight who sat in front of me. Lunch was served but I opted to pass on it.

It was a bumpy flight on an old Russian aircraft that landed in Pyongyang's Sunan International Airport. The plane taxied to a corner of the airport, adjacent to the rear of the terminal where I was met by two North Korean officials who took my passport for processing purposes. Later my passport was returned with no markings in the passport for my trip to North Korea, to keep this secret trip off the record. Rather, I was given an official piece of paper, with my photograph, from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, number 29320004, stamped by an immigration officer, stating that I arrived legally in North Korea.

A black vehicle, with a young MSS officer, who spoke English well, accompanied me to the State Guest House where I would reside for the next few days. This being my first visit to Pyongyang, the young officer spent considerable time pointing out so-called scenic spots, like the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, the official mausoleum for Kim il Sung, and the Juche Tower. Pyongyang was a bit surreal: large boulevards, few vehicles, Russian-esque office buildings, and traffic policewomen directing the few vehicles on the roads.

We arrived at the State Guest House, on a hill facing the Tumen River. My room was large, with lots of heat, and a TV that repeatedly played – on the one available channel – World War II patriotic movies. My first meeting occurred late in the afternoon of January 29, at the guest house, with

the Minister of MSS, General U Dong Chok, who welcomed me to Pyongyang. During this rather long welcoming meeting, I was impressed with U's friendly attitude and his stated willingness to help arrange my schedule for the next two days. U read from his talking points, initially stating that North Korea had a secret channel to South Korea and that the North did not have a hostile policy toward the United States, emphasizing that North Korea's nuclear weapons were a deterrent. My response to his question concerning what I wanted to discuss during my visit and meetings was: A return to negotiations and moratorium on nuclear tests and missile launches, including the North's HEU program in any future negotiations, and refraining from proliferating nuclear weapons and/or fissile material to rogue states or terrorists. In return, as memorialized in the Six-Party Talks Joint Statement of September 19, 2005, North Korea would receive: security assurances; economic development assistance; and, upon returning to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty as a non-nuclear weapons state, a dialogue for the provision of light water reactors for civilian nuclear energy, and the beginning of a dialogue to establish normal relations with the United States, with the initial establishment of liaison offices in our respective capitals. I was confident this meeting, and my responses to U's questions, were recorded and shared with the officials I would be meeting during the next few days.

General U said he was confident the talks would go well and that he and his organization were prepared to assist when appropriate. He then informed me that he had arranged for me to meet with Jang Song-thaek, considered the second most powerful person in North Korea, married to Kim Kyong-hui, the sister of Kim Jong-il; and, General Kim Yong-chol, Director of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, North Korea's national intelligence agency. I had requested meetings with these officials and others, and Minister U said he had arranged meetings with all of them.

I also asked to meet with Kim Jong-il, but was not surprised when Minister U said that Kim was not available for a meeting.

The meeting took place the next day, January 30, at 10 a.m., with General Kim Yong-chol at his office. Kim was in his military attire; he was courteous but very direct. General Kim mentioned the Korean War and the ceasefire in 1953 with an Armistice Agreement noting, however, the continuation of hostile relations between our countries. He said North Korea wanted improved relations with the United States. He then talked about North Korea's sovereign right to put a satellite in orbit, which, he said, would be used for peaceful purposes. Kim also said that North Korea has nuclear weapons for defensive purposes, with no intention to threaten or harm the United States. He said the North was willing to denuclearize, stating, however, that there should be no nuclear support to South Korea. He also said he wrote three letters to the Secretary of Defense, but there was no response.

I told Kim the United States wants North Korea to return to negotiations and resume implementation of the September 19, 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks. Of course, the United States expects North Korea to include its Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) Program in the denuclearization process, in return for the significant list of deliverables available to North Korea once it moves toward complete and verifiable denuclearization. I mentioned North Korea's nuclear assistance to Syria in Al Kibar for the construction of a nuclear reactor for nuclear weapons, and said this was blatant nuclear proliferation. We went back and forth on these and other issues with Kim denying any nuclear assistance to Syria. He said North Korea would continue to do what was necessary for its security, stating that North Korea wants good relations with the United States. The meeting ended, with Kim saying we would

meet later that day with the atomic energy chief, per my request.

That afternoon, I told General Kim Yong-chol, with his atomic energy chief, Li Toe Gon, present, that the United States knew about North Korea's HEU program, and that it provided Syria with nuclear technical support and materials for the five-megawatt nuclear reactor Syria was building in Al Kibar. Kim and Li denied that North Korea was providing nuclear support to Syria. It was obvious to me, however, that both these officials knew the United States was confident—and correct—in its discovery of North Korea's HEU program and assistance with Syria's nuclear reactor.

I could only imagine the response of Kim Jong-il when they revealed (assuming they did) that documents they provided to the United States helped to confirm that North Korea, in fact, had an HEU program that North Korea denied having. This was the HEU program that former President Trump, during the Hanoi Conference in February 2019 with Chairman Kim Jong Un, insisted that North Korea also include in its proposal to halt activities at the Yongbyon plutonium nuclear facility in return for the lifting of United Nations sanctions imposed since 2016. When Trump asked Kim to include these HEU facilities, and Kim refused, the Hanoi Summit came to an abrupt end.

The following day, January 31, at 10 a.m., I met Jang Song-thaek, the second most powerful leader in North Korea who, at that time, was Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission. I initially arrived, with my MSS escort, in a conference room in what I thought was a building housing the Korean Workers' Party. Jang arrived on time, with a young man who appeared to be his assistant and note taker. Jang was polite, welcoming me to Pyongyang and saying the National Defense Commission, which he and Kim Jong-il headed, was established to ensure the security of North Korea, stating the military threat from

the United States is their primary concern. He said, in a soft and nonconfrontational voice, that the United States should remove its hostile policy toward North Korea and work to improve relations through dialogue. Jang said North Korea's nuclear program was for strategic military deterrence only. He mentioned President Bush's 2002 State of the Union speech in which North Korea—with Iran and Iraq—was said to be part of the Axis of Evil countries confronting the United States. He also cited a U.S. 2001 Nuclear Posture Review that mentioned a policy of using nuclear weapons preemptively which convinced North Korea that it needed nuclear weapons for deterrence purposes. Jang went on to say that former Secretary of State Albright had visited North Korea and met with Kim Jong-il and there was talk of a visit by President Clinton to Pyongyang. He said that is the model to follow. The need existed for a dialogue—a summit at a senior level to resolve issues peacefully. Jang said he supports negotiations and a peaceful resolution of issues with the United States.

I then went through my talking points: North Korea quitting the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and building more nuclear weapons and missiles to deliver them; pursuing a clandestine HEU program and pulling out of the Six-Party Talks and now refusing to engage with the United States, as they fabricate more fissile material for nuclear weapons. I cited North Korea's nuclear assistance to Syria in the construction of a nuclear reactor in Al Kibar for nuclear weapons. I cited the September 2005 Joint Statement of the Six-Party Talks and the deliverables available to North Korea with complete and verifiable denuclearization.

Jang patiently listened, while his assistant took notes. After close to the scheduled one hour, Jang said he is prepared to work actively to resolve issues peacefully with the United States. He told me to pass that message to the leadership in the United States and to keep in touch with him.

This was the highlight of my visit to Pyongyang. Jang came across as a sincere person who wanted to play an active role in establishing a dialogue with the United States, similar, as he said, to the dialogue during the Clinton Administration and the role of Secretary Albright.

There were some other meetings, but nothing compared to the meeting with Jang and, to some extent, even with the irascible Kim Yong-chol. Minister U hosted a farewell dinner that evening at a popular restaurant noted for its cold noodles. I asked why the restaurant was empty at dinner time. U said the restaurant was closed on that day and opened just for us. I doubted that explanation, sensing that the MSS closed the restaurant due to my presence in the restaurant.

I left Pyongyang the morning of February 1, on the same Air Koryo aircraft. I again passed on the food. Transiting Beijing International Airport was again very smooth. I had no doubt China was aware of my trip to Pyongyang and ensured that nothing went wrong at Beijing's international airport. In December 2013, Jang was brutally executed by orders from the new leader, Kim Jong Un, who took over from his father, Kim Jong-il, who died in December 2011.

Chapter Nine

Inside the Oval Office

When I returned to the United States, I separately briefed the Director of National Intelligence (DNI), Jim Clapper, and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (DCIA), General David Patraeus. I told them that the visit went well and I was most impressed with Vice Chairman Jang Song-thaek, who seemed sincere in wanting a good relationship with the United States.

I was then scheduled to brief President Obama, with his staff telling me that pictures of the briefing would be taken and posted on the White House website to ensure North Korea knew that I briefed the president on my trip to North Korea. With the president were Vice President Joe Biden and seniors from the National Security Council and the Intelligence Community. I told President Obama that the trip went well, focusing on the role of the MSS in arranging for my visit to Pyongyang as well as a series of meetings. I highlighted the meetings with General Kim Yong-chol and Vice Chairman Jang Song-thaek. I said my main takeaway, however, was my meeting with Jang. I said he reminded me of China's Deng Xiaoping, who was purged twice by the Gang of Four and then, in 1978, replaced Hua Guofeng as China's supreme leader. I said Deng survived despite the chaos of the Cultural Revolution when even China's Vice President, Liu Shaoqi, was purged and eventually died due to medical neglect. *A note of humor:* Vice President Biden cautioned against any such act against him.

I said Jang reminded me of Deng, given that he was also purged twice and is now the second most powerful leader in North Korea. I said Jang seemed sincere in saying North Korea wanted and needed a good relationship with the United States and offered to work to make this happen—that a normal relationship with the United States was his goal. I suggested to Obama that we respond to Jang's

overture, with a message and possibly another visit to Pyongyang to, *inter alia*, meet with Jang to establish a relationship with him and a plan to re-engage with North Korea. I said Jang was a senior leader we could work with and recommended that we reach out to him soonest. President Obama, who listened intently and asked some good questions, thanked me for the briefing and, as I was leaving the Oval Office, asked—in good humor—how the food was in Pyongyang. I said it was fine.

A colleague who was at this and other briefings of the President, said Obama was particularly interested in this briefing. He reminded me that the President's assistant had interrupted the briefing to whisper to the President that his foreign guest was waiting for their scheduled meeting. The President told his assistant to have his guest wait until after the briefing, indicative of the President's interest in the briefing.

A day after briefing the President, the Senior Director for Nonproliferation, Gary Samore, briefly mentioned to me in the hall of the Old Executive Office building, that he heard about my briefing to the President and would counsel against the President packing his bags for a trip to Pyongyang. I interpreted that to mean that others at the briefing had doubts about my description of Jang Song-thaek and his expressed willingness to work on his end to improve relations with the United States.

Not hearing from the White House or the NSC about sending a response to Jang Song-thaek, or at least acknowledging that we wanted to follow up on his offer to assist, I thought the skeptics prevailed and dissuaded the President and his staff from taking any action on my briefing and the role Jang Song-thaek could play in improving relations with North Korea. This was a real disappointment and missed opportunity, in my view. To this day I criticize myself for not being more assertive with those decision makers who obviously were not prepared to

follow up with Jang and his invitation to work with him to improve relations.

Passing the Baton

Unexpectedly, in February 2012, after I left my job as Director of the National Counterproliferation Center but remained a special adviser to the DNI, I received an urgent message from my office to immediately speak to a senior U.S. Government official, on a secure line. I immediately left a dinner and conference, hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy in Crystal City, and returned to my office at the ODNI. I contacted the government official, a friend and colleague of many years, on a secure line. He told me the White House wanted me to immediately arrange to introduce him to my North Korean contacts and inform them that he would be replacing me as our principal contact with North Korea. He said this message was meant to convey to North Korea the importance of this channel, given that the official was a more senior officer. I called my MSS contact that evening, who was surprised to hear from me, saying I had not contacted them in over one year since my meetings in Pyongyang. I did not respond to that comment but did arrange for my successor and me to visit Pyongyang the following week. I told my North Korean contact that the senior official would be replacing me and requested meetings with all of their senior leaders, definitely to include Jang Song-thaek and Generals Kim Yong-chol and U Dong Chok and if possible, with Kim Jong Un, North Korea's new supreme leader.

My successor and I planned to visit North Korea at a time when the State Department was negotiating with North Korea for a moratorium on nuclear tests and missile launches in return for the United States providing a significant amount of food aid. There were media reports, however, that Kim Jong Un was planning to launch a rocket

to put a satellite in orbit on April 1, 2012, the centennial of the birth of his grandfather, Kim il Sung. Technically, however, this would be a violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions prohibiting the launching of a ballistic missile—or even a rocket since both use similar components. And, remembering from my years of Six-Party Talks negotiations with North Korea and the lectures I would get about its so-called sovereign right to put a satellite in orbit, my successor and I were assured that our trip was to focus on the special channel to North Korea's leadership, and not an attempt to convince North Korea to stand down on a satellite launch.

We took a private plane to Guam and transferred to an unmarked military plane for the flight to Pyongyang's Sunan International Airport. During the flight, we were advised that the Minister of the MSS, U Dong Chok, was ill and the first meeting would be with an MSS official representing him. We landed in Pyongyang's international airport and taxied to a secluded area. Our unmarked military aircraft would remain at the airport for our return trip in two days. Two black limousines met us as we disembarked from the plane and an MSS official escorted us to the same guest house I resided in one year ago. This time, however, I had a small room with no view and no TV. My successor had the bigger room, with the same TV playing the same World War II patriotic movies. The first meeting the next morning was with an MSS officer representing Minister U who, he said, was ill and unable to meet with my successor. My successor read his talking points, which I had not seen prior to or during the flight to Pyongyang. I thought that was strange. I had assumed the author(s) of these talking points would have wanted my views.

The message from the talking points was straightforward—you have two options: Improve relations with the United States by giving up your nuclear weapons and programs or suffer with greater isolation and more

sanctions. The MSS officer asked if he could have a copy of the talking points, which were provided.

After that morning meeting, we were informed that the Vice Chairman of the National Defense Commission and North Korea's second most powerful leader, Jang Song-thaek, canceled his meeting with my successor that afternoon, ostensibly due to scheduling problems. It was obvious to me that Jang was briefed on the morning session and, after reviewing the talking points, decided to cancel the meeting.

The meeting with General Kim Yong-chol was still scheduled, so we proceeded to his office. The first thing from Kim's mouth to my successor was: "You don't have to read your talking points, I know what they say." My successor said he was instructed to read them, which he did. The meeting with Kim was less than satisfactory.

The day did not go well and my successor said he was thinking of leaving early. I advised against it. We then had dinner with our MSS host at the State Guest House, leaving early the next morning.

A New Role Begins

I then ceased contact with North Korea, using this special channel. However, in July 2012, after I left the ODNI, I received a call, while en route to London with my family for a holiday, from a U.S. colleague, Lee Sigal, saying he was arranging a Track 1.5 meeting (former U.S. officials meeting with North Korean officials) with North Korea and North Korea suggested that I participate in these meetings, scheduled to be held with North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister, Ri Yong ho. I agreed and this was the beginning of a series of Track 1.5 meetings with North Korea, first with Ri Yong ho and, when he was promoted to Foreign Minister, then with Vice Foreign Minister Han Sung Ryol. Lee Sigal and Ambassador Steve Bosworth participated in

these meetings, followed by Ambassador Gallucci, after Bosworth passed away.

Surprisingly to me, these meetings were productive. They permitted frank exchanges; the results were shared with seniors in Washington. Our last meeting was in Kuala Lumpur in late 2016, before the presidential election, when we continued to encourage North Korea to meet with the Obama Administration's representative for negotiations with North Korea. What we got back was a definitive "no," we will not deal with the Obama Administration. This was unfortunate, but Vice Foreign Minister Ri Yong ho—and others in our previous meetings with North Korea—maintained that their past efforts to engage meaningfully with the Obama Administration were rebuffed; thus North Korea was now taking a hard position and refusing any overtures from the Obama Administration, awaiting results of the presidential election.

With the November 2016 election of Donald Trump, these Track 1.5 meetings with North Korea ended abruptly, followed by 2017 and a year of "fire and fury." Then, in 2018, President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un embraced in Singapore and Hanoi—thus beginning a period of harmony and hope, only to be dashed abruptly during the February 2019 Hanoi Summit.

Currently, I routinely participate in Track 2 meetings (all former officials) with representatives from China and Russia to discuss resolving the nuclear issue with North Korea. The last meeting was in June 2023, in Geneva, Switzerland. There was consensus that denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was our common objective, but disagreement on the utility of sanctions persisted, with China and Russia unwilling to support any United Nations Security Resolution sanctioning North Korea, and China still not prepared to use its leverage with North Korea to get North Korea to return to negotiations.

During the first year of Donald Trump's presidency, there was extreme tension with North Korea—"fire and fury." North Korea had conducted two nuclear tests in 2016, the last year of the Obama Administration, when relations with the North were tense. But with Trump, it became even more tense with the sixth nuclear test in September 2017, which was assessed to have used over 250 kilotons of TNT, and was 16 times more powerful than the bomb used over Hiroshima, Japan in 1945. North Korea reportedly also launched 25 missiles in 2017, to include the Hwasong-15 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile capable of reaching the United States. Trump responded to this escalation by enhancing joint military exercises with South Korea, with the introduction of strategic assets.

This extreme tension with North Korea was defused in 2018 when representatives from South Korea informed President Trump that Kim Jong Un was interested in meeting with Trump. Surprisingly, Trump agreed to meet with Kim and in June 2018, the first of two summits was held in Singapore, with significant media coverage and considerable pomp and ceremony for this historic summit. Chairman Kim took advantage of this unprecedented summit, sightseeing in Singapore and showing a friendly face to the world. Portions of this high-level diplomacy and sightseeing were broadcast to the people of North Korea, an historic first. Indeed, it showed Singapore to be a modern and advanced country, a message Pyongyang refrains from showing to its own people, who are suffering with food scarcity; over 40% of the population is malnourished.

The Trump-Kim meeting in Singapore resulted in a short Joint Memorandum, stating that the United States and DPRK committed to establish a new U.S.-DPRK relationship and build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula; the DPRK also committed to working toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula; and, the United States and DPRK committed to

recovering POW/MIA remains, including the immediate repatriation of those already identified.

Although I, like so many other so-called North Korea experts, did not support our president meeting with Kim, at least not until our negotiators worked through the myriad of outstanding issues with North Korea and made arrangements to ensure that any meeting with our president would be successful, I was pleasantly surprised to see this Joint Statement from the Singapore Summit. Yes, it was brief, but I thought there was sufficient substance and display of goodwill to move forward. No doubt, Supreme Leader Kim was pleased with the attention he received and a Joint Statement that focused on a transformation of relations between the United States and North Korea. Kim also had to be pleased with Trump's announcement that U.S.-South Korea military exercises would be suspended for the fall 2018. North Korea's return of 55 sets of U.S. soldiers' remains was a gesture well-received in the United States.

Unfortunately, the follow-on Hanoi Summit in February 2019 was a failure. Kim made a proposal that I and many think he thought Trump would accept. Kim offered the permanent dismantlement of a portion of nuclear material production facilities at the Yongbyon Nuclear Research facility in exchange for the "partial lifting" of sanctions, namely the 2016 and 2017 sanctions on North Korea's export industries that also limited petroleum imports. Trump's response was that North Korea should unilaterally dismantle its entire nuclear weapons program in return for sanctions relief. Trump obviously was referring to the HEU facilities that were enriching uranium for nuclear weapons, facilities that North Korea continued to deny having, although they must have known that the United States knew the location of some of these facilities. It appeared that Kim was surprised with the U.S. counterproposal and said he did not agree with Trump's proposal. With this

unexpected turn of events, Trump ended the session, cancelling the scheduled lunch and signing ceremony.

The failure of the Hanoi Summit was a disappointment. North Korea thought Trump was prepared to sign a declaration to end the Korean War, and move a step closer to a peace agreement to end the war, something North Korea wants. It was also an opportunity to have liaison offices in our respective capitals, also something North Korea wants. Indeed, in 2000, during the visit of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to North Korea and her meeting with Chairman Kim Jong-il, the possibility of the establishment of liaison offices was discussed, with a potential visit of former President Clinton to Pyongyang, which did not happen, due mainly to the upcoming election in the United States. For a brief period, this all seemed possible again but, in the end, it did not happen. A disappointed Chairman Kim, who apparently thought his offer of Yongbyon would be accepted, returned to Pyongyang empty-handed—a significant “loss of face.” Since then, North Korea has exponentially increased its ballistic missile capabilities, with an ICBM now capable of targeting the United States.

Chapter Ten

Nuclear Proliferation

One of the greatest existential threats to the United States and its allies and partners is nuclear proliferation from North Korea. I remember North Korean Ambassador Yi Gun's admonition to me at our first private meeting during the second Plenary session of the Six-Party Talks in February 2004, at the State Guest House in Beijing, China, when he said: "Accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, as you did for Pakistan, and we can be good friends. If you don't, we will build more nuclear weapons, test them and sell some of them to other countries." I was taken aback by this bold and arrogant statement. I said that if a nuclear weapon was used against the United States or an ally, we would know the weapon was from North Korea and the United States would respond quickly with overwhelming military force against Pyongyang, noting that we had the scientific forensic ability – analyzing the weapon's isotopic content – to determine that the nuclear weapon was from North Korea. That brief exchange with North Korea's Deputy Representative to the Six-Party Talks stayed with me through the years, and certainly when I joined the ODNI in January 2006 as an Associate Director of National Intelligence and the Intelligence Community's Mission Manager for North Korea.

After I joined the ODNI, North Korea had its first nuclear test in October 2006. Former Vice President Dick Cheney, in his memoir *In My Time*, states that President Bush, on the morning of October 9, after the nuclear blast was detected Sunday evening on October 8, went before the cameras in the Diplomatic Reception Room to condemn the test and issue a warning:

The North Korean regime remains one of the world's leading proliferators of missile

technology, including transfers to Iran and Syria. The transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable for the consequences of such action.²⁶

Under the cover of darkness, just after midnight on September 6, 2007, Israeli F-15s entered Syrian airspace and bombed a nuclear reactor at Al Kibar. What followed was silence—from Israel, Syria and the United States—about this bold airstrike. Seven months later, the White House and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) confirmed that Al Kibar was a nuclear facility, despite Syria's denial and effort to clean the site. Confident they did a good job cleaning the site, Syria invited the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect the site. The IAEA inspected the site and reported evidence of uranium and graphite, concluding that the site had the features of a nuclear reactor, despite Syria's denial. In 2011, the IAEA confirmed that the Al Kibar site was a nuclear reactor.

What Israel destroyed was a gas-cooled, graphite-moderated nuclear reactor, similar to North Korea's nuclear reactor in Yongbyon. In April 2007, Meir Dagan, Israel's Director of Mossad, traveled to Washington and briefed National Security Advisor Steve Hadley and Vice President Cheney about Israel's detection of Al Kibar and North Korea's assistance in the construction of this nuclear reactor, with photos of the North Korean official in charge of North Korea's nuclear reactor at Yongbyon standing next to the leader of the Syrian Atomic Energy Commission. Another photo showed this same North Korean official with the North Korean delegation to the Six-Party Talks. Former Vice President Cheney states in his memoir that,

²⁶ Dick Cheney, *In My Time* (New York, Threshold Editions, 2012), p. 465.

according to a briefing by senior U.S. intelligence officials, 'sustained nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Syria likely began as early as 1997, with multiple visits by senior North Koreans from Yongbyon to Syria before construction began at al-Kibar in 2001, and, according to the intelligence community, subsequent contacts as well.'²⁷

This clearly was a case of North Korea providing technical and material support to Syria for the construction of a nuclear reactor for one purpose—nuclear weapons. Even as the Mission Manager for North Korea, I was not briefed on details related to Israel's detection of Al Kibar—hidden in a remote desert area, adjacent to the Euphrates River, with a concrete facade concealing the reactor. Only a few senior officials in the Intelligence Community and throughout the government were briefed on Al Kibar, with a strict media embargo. There was concern that the Israeli bombing could have precipitated a military response from Syria, with the prospect of a larger regional war in the Middle East and, also, concern that Syria might take retaliatory action against American troops in Iraq. The media embargo continued for a few months.

I was then asked to join a few colleagues to meet with CIA Director Mike Hayden to finalize an April 24, 2008 12-minute video and extensive briefing for the public that made a strong case that the target in Al Kibar was a North Korean-built reactor designed for producing weapons-usable plutonium. There was considerable pressure from Congress to explain what happened at Al Kibar, thus this public dissemination of the video and briefing, which followed extensive briefings to Congress. Israel was given a heads-up of our intention to go public with Al Kibar, while the government of Israel remained silent, until May 2018,

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

when Israel for the first time admitted that it bombed a suspected Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007, saying it should be a warning to Iran that it would not be allowed to develop nuclear weapons.

North Korea clearly violated – by proliferating nuclear technology to Syria, a state sponsor of terrorism – President Bush’s red line after its first nuclear test in October 2006. Despite North Korea’s nuclear proliferation to Syria at Al Kibar, on October 11, 2008, North Korea was removed from the Department of State list of State Sponsors of Terrorism. In November 2017, however, former President Donald Trump put North Korea back on the list.

Fissile Material Production

Selling nuclear weapons or nuclear technology to a rogue state, as North Korea did with Syria at Al Kibar, is one form of nuclear proliferation. Another is selling or providing fissile material for a dirty bomb to a rogue state or non-state terrorist organization.

North Korea uses two forms of fissile material for its nuclear weapons: plutonium and highly enriched uranium. Its Yongbyon five megawatt reactor, according to South Korea’s biannual report publicly released in 2022, estimates that North Korea has 70 kilograms of plutonium.²⁸

In 2010, North Korea revealed to Siegfried S. Hecker, the former Director of Los Alamos National Laboratories who was visiting North Korea, a recently built Uranium Enrichment Plant (UEP) at the Yongbyon Nuclear Science and Weapons Research Center, with over 2,000 spinning centrifuges. The facility appeared to be configured for the production of Light Enriched Uranium (LEU). However, an

²⁸“South Korea Nuclear Profile, 2022 Edition,” *International Atomic Energy Agency*, available at <https://cnpp.iaea.org/countryprofiles/KoreaRepublicof/KoreaRepublicof.htm>.

inspection of the facility would be necessary to determine if North Korea was using this facility for weapons grade Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU). Since Hecker's visit in 2010, overhead imagery indicates a major expansion at the uranium enrichment plant at Yongbyon.²⁹

Assessing North Korea's fissile material production capacity is key to determining the number of nuclear weapons North Korea could have. Indeed, it is assessed that North Korea has the ability to weaponize and mate these nuclear warheads to ballistic missiles.

Plutonium reactors are easy to identify, with visible signatures easy to monitor via satellite imagery. Uranium enrichment facilities are much more difficult to monitor, given the absence of observable signatures, via satellites or even in the proximity of a suspected uranium enrichment facility.

According to the IAEA, a state would need eight kilograms of plutonium and 25 kilograms of HEU to make a nuclear weapon.

It is estimated that North Korea has produced enough fissile material for 40-to-60 nuclear warheads, although the exact number remains unknown. According to the Arms Control Association, based on its published estimates in October 2022, North Korea could have 250-500 kilograms of HEU, produced at its UEP facility in Yongbyon and/or at a covert UEP facility or facilities elsewhere in North Korea. There is considerable media reporting that North Korea has one or two covert uranium enrichment sites; reportedly there is a Kangson Enrichment Site in the Chollema-guyok district outside of Pyongyang³⁰

²⁹ David E. Sanger, "North Koreans Unveil New Plant for Nuclear Use," *The New York Times*, November 20, 2010, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/world/asia/21intel.html>.

³⁰ "A Satellite View of North Korea's Nuclear Sites," *Nikkei Asia*, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/static/vdata/north-korea-nuclear/newsgraphics/north-korea-nuclear/>.

The Hanoi Summit between former President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un failed because of this issue – North Korea’s unwillingness to declare its suspected uranium enrichment sites. At the Summit, Kim offered to halt and dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear facility, apparently thinking it would be well-received, but when Trump countered and requested that Kim dismantle all his nuclear sites, definitely to include the suspected uranium enrichment sites, Kim refused and the Summit abruptly ended.³¹ Since then, negotiations with North Korea have ceased and the North has been exponentially increasing its ballistic missile capabilities while continuing to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons.

North Korea could sell or provide fissile material – plutonium or highly enriched uranium – to a rogue state or non-state terrorist organization for a dirty bomb. There has been reporting that organizations like al-Qaeda previously attempted to acquire a nuclear weapon or fissile material for a dirty bomb. Thus, any future agreement with North Korea should not only prohibit nuclear tests and ballistic missile launches, but also the production of fissile material, plutonium and highly enriched uranium.

Ballistic Missile Business

North Korea has sold missiles and missile technology to Libya, Iran and Syria since the early 1970s. For North Korea it is a business, selling whatever it has that is marketable, for a price. And, ballistic missiles are marketable, with the proceeds going into the development of North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

From the mid-1970s until December 2003, when Libya decided to end its weapons of mass destruction program, destroying its ballistic missiles with a range of over 300

³¹ Pak, op. cit.

kilometers, North Korea had provided Libya with Scud C missiles with a range of 550 kilometers and had entered into discussions for the acquisition of medium-range ballistic missiles (Hwasong-7).

Iran had the closest working relationship with North Korea on a multitude of ballistic missile programs, with sales of Scud B 300-kilometer range missiles in the 1980s and the Scud C 500-kilometer range missiles in the 1990s. North Korea also provided Iran with missile production technology. In the latter 1990s, the Intelligence Community assessed that North Korea's cooperation with Iran's ballistic missile program was ongoing. However, in February 2016, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told the Senate Armed Services Committee that "of late... there has not been a great deal of interchange between Iran and North Korea."

Syria procured both Scud B and Scud C missiles from North Korea, according to a 1995 CIA assessment. Moreover, Syria was able to produce missiles with North Korea-supplied equipment. It is clear that North Korea has proliferated nuclear materials and technology to rogue states and has sold missiles to those same rogue states. So, when it comes to nuclear and missile proliferation, North Korea is a serial proliferator, primarily for money, but also for ideological reasons—supporting enemies of the United States.

Chapter Eleven

Illicit Activities

When I was appointed Chief of East Asia Operations in 2000, I was determined to learn more about North Korea, given that we knew so little about the leadership and its plans and intentions. What we did know, however, was its illicit activities. I personally spent hundreds of hours meeting with counterparts at the Department of Treasury and at the FBI to discuss North Korea's counterfeiting of the U.S. \$100 note. It was an excellent forgery, far better than Iran's which, according to a 1992 published Congressional report, was "nearly perfect," being circulated with the help of Syria and showing up in Europe, Asia, Africa and the former Soviet Republics.

North Korea's counterfeit \$100 note, called the "super note," was even better than Iran's. Working through Office 39, responsible for the North's illicit activities, North Korea in the early 1990s acquired an intaglio printing press from Japan, cloth paper with the same red and blue fibers from Hong Kong, and magnetic color-shifting ink from France, thus producing a near-perfect counterfeit \$100 note. In 2013, the Federal Reserve began circulating a redesigned \$100 note with embedded security features that make it easier to authenticate but harder to replicate. This effort to redesign the \$100 note was due mainly to North Korea's "super note."³²

North Korea also counterfeits pharmaceuticals and U.S. brand cigarettes, while trafficking in methamphetamine and other narcotics. This criminal enterprise, works through North Korea's embassies and trade offices worldwide, and provides the resources necessary to sustain

³² "North Korea Counterfeiting of US Currency," *Every CRS Report*, March 22, 2006 - June 12, 2009, available at <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/RL33324.html>.

operations in those embassies. The remainder of the acquired revenue goes to North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, and ensues that the leadership and elites in Pyongyang receive the foreign luxury goods they expect.

Basically, we are dealing with a criminal state when it comes to illicit activities. Anything that generates revenue for the leadership, to sustain its lifestyle and to invest in its nuclear and missile programs, is permissible. And, with the advent of the internet, cyber crime has proven to be very profitable for the regime.³³

³³ "Illicit Economic Activities of the North Korean Government," *Brookings Institution*, April 15, 2014, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/events/illicit-economic-activities-of-the-north-korean-government/>.

Chapter Twelve

Current Impasse

Since the failed Hanoi Summit, North Korea has refused to return to negotiations with the United States. The new conservative Yoon Suk Yeol government in South Korea has adopted a harder policy toward North Korea than the previous Moon Jae-in administration. The April 2023 summit between President Joe Biden and President Yoon Suk Yeol, on the 70th anniversary of the 1953 Armistice halting the Korean war, was historic. A Washington Declaration was signed, enhancing U.S. extended nuclear deterrence commitments to South Korea, with the establishment of a nuclear consultative group between the United States and South Korea and a U.S. commitment to include nuclear armed submarines and other strategic assets into annual joint U.S.-ROK military exercises. As expected, North Korea criticized the United States and South Korea for strengthening U.S. extended nuclear deterrence, calling it a “product of heinous hostile policy” against Pyongyang, and vowing to enhance its “military deterrence” against South Korea and the United States.

On April 13, 2023, North Korea launched the Hwasong-18, a three-stage, solid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of targeting the whole of the United States. This was preceded by a March 15 launch of a road-mobile Hwasong-17 ICBM capable of reaching distances as far as 15,000 kilometers, the largest road-mobile ICBM in the world. Additionally, it launched two cruise missiles from a submarine platform and numerous short-range and hypersonic missiles. So far, in 2023 the North has launched close to 30 ballistic missiles, getting close to the over 90 ballistic missiles launched in 2022.

As North Korea continues to display its ballistic missile prowess, what we are not seeing is the incessant production of nuclear weapons, based on plutonium and HEU.

Conservative estimates credit North Korea with between 40-60 nuclear weapons, with a recent Rand report estimating that North Korea could have almost 250 nuclear weapons by 2027.

Of immediate concern is the September 2022 decision of North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly to legitimize the preemptive use of nuclear weapons. Thus, if there is an imminent or perceived to be an imminent attack on its leadership or command and control, North Korea will preemptively use its nuclear weapons, pursuant to its new first-use nuclear doctrine. On September 8, North Korea's media reported that Kim Jong Un outlined in a speech that the law permitting the justifiable use of nuclear weapons made North Korea's position as a nuclear state "irreversible," unless the world, as well as the political and military situations on the Korean Peninsula, changed.

North Korea's recent "nuclear counterattack exercise" during the U.S.-South Korea "Freedom Shield" annual joint military exercise was a clear statement from the North that it is prepared and willing to use tactical nuclear weapons against targets in South Korea. The possibility of accidental or intentional conflict on the Korean Peninsula has increased exponentially over the past year.

As North Korea prepares for a seventh nuclear test and additional missile launches, while building more nuclear weapons and reportedly providing military support to Russia for its war in Ukraine, the domestic situation in North Korea is bleak. Food and medicine are in short supply, with concern that people will die of starvation due to food shortages. In the 1990s, over one million people reportedly died of starvation. This could happen again, especially given North Korea's three-year countrywide lockdown due to Covid-19. The scarcity of fertilizer, bad weather and Pyongyang's unhelpful decision to close many private markets all contributed to a dire economic prediction for 2023.

North Korea is a dangerous nuclear weapons state with significant economic issues: food scarcity, dearth of medicines and therapeutics, and a backward health care system. The nuclear and economic situation in North Korea requires immediate international attention.

Chapter Thirteen

A Brutal Regime

The human rights situation in North Korea is tragic. The State Department 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices in North Korea elaborated on unlawful or arbitrary killings by the government; forced disappearances; torture and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment and punishment by government authorities; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions, including in political prison camps; arbitrary arrests and detentions of political prisoners and detainees and transnational repression against individuals in another country, etc. The list of these heinous abuses goes on and on.

Human rights needs to be a core element in any future negotiations with North Korea. My professional relationship with a few senior North Korean officials who were executed or disappeared continues to haunt me. I often ask if I or my government could have done more to prevent this cruelty.

Jang Song-thaek

Jang was the second most powerful official in North Korea and the uncle of Kim Jong Un. He was publicly tried and executed, reportedly by a firing squad, in December 2013, accused of attempting to overthrow the state, building his own personality cult, and involvement in economic corruption. Before Jang's execution, he reportedly was taken to the Gang Gun Military Academy where hundreds of officials were gathered to witness the execution of Jang's two deputies in the ruling Workers' Party: Ri Ryong-ha and Jang Su-gil. Both were torn apart by anti-aircraft machine guns, and then their bodies incinerated by flamethrowers, according to South Korea's National Intelligence Service.

Witnessing this brutality and inhumanity, Jang reportedly fainted.³⁴ As previously mentioned, I had an excellent meeting with Jang Song-thaek on January 31, 2011. During that meeting, Jang said he wanted a good U.S.-North Korea relationship and was prepared to assist. Unfortunately, we were slow in responding to Jang's overture. Kim Jong Un succeeded his father in December 2011, and for the next year Jang served as his mentor. But in December 2013, Kim ordered the public trial and execution of Jang, his uncle and mentor.

Vice Foreign Minister Han Song-Ryol

Han was North Korea's United Nations ambassador responsible for relations with the United States and the principal senior North Korean official for managing the "New York Channel" with the United States; the latter was used extensively during the Six Party talks, from 2003-2008. Han left New York and was promoted to Vice Foreign Minister, replacing Ri Yong ho. In late 2016, I met with Han, and his delegation, for Track 1.5 talks in Kuala Lumpur. His deputy at that time for these talks was Choe Son-hui, who eventually became Minister of Foreign Affairs, replacing Ri Yong ho. South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that Han was removed from North Korea's latest directory of government officials, citing a media report that Han was sent to a remote mine for ideological re-education. To date, Han has not been seen.³⁵

³⁴ Choe Sang-hun, "In Hail of Bullets and Fire, North Korea Killed an Official Who Wanted Reform," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2016, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/13/world/asia/north-korea-executions-jang-song-thaek.html>.

³⁵ "N.K. Official Handling U.S. Affairs Removed from Seoul's Info Book Aid Punishment Speculation," *Yonhap News Agency*, January 15, 2019, available at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20190130002700325>.

General Ryu Gyang

He was the Deputy Minister of State Security and reportedly—from North Korean escapees who knew General Ryu and his family—the 2008 recipient of the National Hero Award from Kim Jong-il, for his work in getting the United States to remove North Korea from the State Department list of terrorist states. Ryu reportedly was executed in January 2011, after visiting South Korea in late 2010 to meet with South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to arrange for a summit with Kim Jong-il, for the price of \$10 billion. President Lee reportedly refused. Ryu returned to Pyongyang, unsuccessful in his mission. According to these escapees who knew Ryu, after Ryu returned from Seoul, he attended a reception hosted by Kim Jong-il, with the younger Kim Jong Un in attendance. Immediately thereafter, Kim Jong-il decided to have Ryu executed, possibly due to his unsuccessful mission to South Korea or because Ryu returned from Seoul without gifts for the Kims. Ryu's family—wife and married daughter and college age son—were ordered to be sent to a political prison gulag, but Ryu's wife reportedly opted to have the family executed rather than spend life in a political prison camp, with no hope of release. I cannot corroborate what these escapees privately provided to me, but General Ryu Gyang has not been seen since his return from Seoul in late 2011.

During many hours of negotiations in Singapore with General Ryu for the release of the two American journalists, his words after our first two days of meetings stayed with me: "If I fail in these negotiations, there will be consequences for me in my country when I return unsuccessful, unlike in your country."

General U Dong Chok

U was the former Minister of State Security and my principal contact for negotiations in Singapore for the release of the two U.S. journalists and making arrangements for my two secret trips to Pyongyang. After arranging for the second trip to introduce my replacement, U Donk Chok reportedly was too ill to meet with us during our February 2011 visit to Pyongyang. The Korean Times of South Korea reported that Kim Jong Un purged General U when he assumed his father's key position in the Workers' Party – aimed at consolidating his power. Since that time, U has not been seen.³⁶

Ri Yong ho

Ri was the former Foreign Minister and Ambassador in London and New York. I first met him in London, at a track 1.5 meeting, with a subsequent session in Singapore. At that time, Ri was Vice Foreign Minister responsible for relations with the United States. I liked Ri, a professional who knew his brief and was polite in arguing Pyongyang's views. He got along well with his colleagues who accompanied him, especially Choe Song-hui, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs who was Ri's deputy in these talks. He enjoyed swimming and using the fitness center for some quiet time. Ri was keen on improving relations with the United States, even proposing to get on a plane, during our Track 1.5 talks in Singapore, to meet in Washington with his U.S. counterpart, who demurred, preferring to meet in Pyongyang. Ri served as Foreign Minister from 2016 to 2020 and accompanied Chairman Kim to the summits in

³⁶ "N. Korea Purged Senior Intelligence Official," *Yonhap News Agency*, April 17, 2012, available at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20120417002200315>.

Singapore and Hanoi. He was reportedly executed in 2022, possibly due to the failure of the Hanoi Summit.³⁷ Reportedly, Ri's father, Ri Myong je, a senior official, was ordered by Kim Jong-il to execute his own wife, a professor at Kim il Sung University, when she wrote a letter to Kim il Sung complaining about the decadent parties hosted by his son, Kim Jong-il.³⁸

In February 2017, Kim Jong-nam, the half-brother of Kim Jong Un, was assassinated – using VX nerve agent – at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The oldest son of Kim Jong-il, Kim was expected to replace his father as the next supreme leader. In 2001, however, Kim was discovered visiting Tokyo, using a fake passport, reportedly to visit Disneyland. This reportedly embarrassed and angered his father, Kim Jong-il, contributing to Kim's loss of favor with his father. Starting in 2003, Kim lived a life in exile, first in Beijing and then in Macau. Once Kim Jong Un replaced his father in December 2011, Kim Jong-nam started to be publicly critical of North Korea and its failed economy, calling for reform. Some of this criticism appeared in the international press.³⁹

Kim Jong-nam reportedly was close to Jang Song-thaek and both men also reportedly had a good relationship with the leadership in Beijing. The public execution of Jang Song-thaek and the public assassination of Kim Jong-nam sent a message to those seniors in Pyongyang, that any hint

³⁷ Sung Yoon Lee, *The Sister-North Korea's Kim Yo Jong, The Most Dangerous Woman in the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2023), p. 60.

³⁸ "Former NK Foreign Minister Likely Executed Last Year," *The Korea Herald*, January 4, 2023, available at <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20230104004100325>.

³⁹ Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Benjamin Haas, "How North Korea Got Away with the Assassination of Kim Jong-nam," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/01/how-north-korea-got-away-with-the-assassination-of-kim-jong-nam>.

of disloyalty to Kim Jong Un will result in a brutal death – to the person and family.

The Institute for National Security Studies in Seoul published a report in 2016 that documented executions of 340 officials, including 140 senior officials in the military, government and the Workers' Party, who were executed since 2011, when Kim Jong Un became the Supreme Leader. The number of documented deaths since 2016 is significantly higher.

Chapter Fourteen

Missed Opportunities and Lessons Learned

When I met Jang Song-thaek in January 2011, he offered to assist in establishing a good bilateral relationship with the United States. Unfortunately, we did not follow up in a timely manner. We did follow up in February 2012, one year later, requesting a meeting to introduce my successor. That meeting was canceled at the last minute by Jang, possibly because he was aware of our strong message, which apparently he and Pyongyang found offensive.

When North Korea is in meetings with the United States, it usually refrains from launching missiles and conducting nuclear tests. When we ignore North Korea, it launches more missiles and conducts more nuclear tests. If our goal is complete and verifiable denuclearization, we have to engage them. Strategic patience does not work with North Korea.

North Korea repeatedly told us that it has a sovereign right to put a satellite in orbit and no country or international organization can deny North Korea that sovereign right. We heard this often in our negotiations with North Korea and John Podesta, during former President Clinton's trip to North Korea for the release of the journalists, heard this from Kim Jong-nam, the President of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly of North Korea. Indeed, the Leap Day Agreement of 2012 failed because North Korea's new chairman, Kim Jong Un, persisted with the launch of a satellite on the centennial of the birth of Kim il-Sung that, we said, violated the moratorium on missile launches, pursuant to the Leap Day Agreement. It is obvious that North Korea will persist with satellite launches, as it did on May 31, 2023, when the mission failed. On November 21, 2023, North Korea finally succeeded in putting a satellite in orbit. More will follow.

China's leadership role with the Six-Party Talks and the resultant Joint Statement of September 19, 2005 could be a model for re-engaging with North Korea. It is a comprehensive document with the goal of complete and verifiable denuclearization of North Korea, with China's current foreign minister, Wang Yi, hosting the Talks. It was based on an action-for-action, commitment-for-commitment approach to eventual denuclearization, in return for security assurances, economic development assistance and a path toward the normalization of relations with the United States, South Korea and Japan.

China is North Korea's only ally, although Russia is now playing a more prominent role in North Korea, given the visit of Kim Jong Un to Russia's far east to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin, and the reported help Russia provided to North Korea for the North's first successful satellite launch—in 2023—and North Korea's reported provision of artillery shells and rockets to Russia for its war in Ukraine. Indeed, The Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1961, reconstituted in 2021, commits China to come to the aid of North Korea in times of conflict. China is North Korea's principal trading partner, with over 90% of North Korea's exports going to China, and over 90% of North Korea's oil and petroleum imports coming from China. As China did in 2003, at the request of the United States, it can do again: Encourage North Korea to return to negotiations with the United States and halt all nuclear tests and missile launches. Currently, due to tension in U.S.-China relations, China is refusing to assist with the North Korea nuclear issue. It is also collaborating with Russia in the United Nations Security Council and vetoing efforts to sanction North Korea for violating United Nations Security Council resolutions. The irony is that it is in China's interest to work with the United States for the eventual denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Indeed, North Korea retaining nuclear weapons will motivate South

Korea, Japan, and others to seek their own nuclear weapons, despite extended nuclear deterrence commitments from the United States. This would result in a nuclear arms race in the region, with the potential for their accidental or intentional use. That is not in China's interest. And any potential instability in North Korea, with the likelihood of "loose nuclear weapons" cannot be in China's interest. As the United States and China currently work to lessen tension and seek areas for cooperation, North Korea should be high on the list.

North Korea wants a normal relationship with the United States, but on its terms: Acceptance as a nuclear weapons state. Indeed, accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state would be a mistake. The possibility of a nuclear weapon or fissile material sold or provided to a rogue state or terrorist organization has to be of concern to all countries. North Korea did this with Syria, with the material and technical support it provided to Syria for a nuclear reactor in Al Kibar. Fortunately, Israel bombed the reactor in September 2007, prior to its activation. We should remain resolute in not accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, while ensuring we have a robust deterrence posture with our allies in South Korea and Japan.

And, although we know that North Korea currently will not give up its nuclear weapons, it is possible and likely that North Korea could be encouraged to return to talks that allude to the prospect of eventual denuclearization – which could take years or even a decade or longer. In the interim, Washington could encourage or persuade North Korea to freeze its nuclear and missile programs in return for sanctions relief and a path to normalization of relations, initially with the prospect of liaison offices in our respective capitals. We saw this in 2000, with the visit of former Secretary of State Albright and her meeting with Kim Jong-il and Kim's interest in normalizing relations with the United States. Being bold and moving in this direction,

despite likely domestic political opposition, could eventually defuse the extreme tension with North Korea and concern in South Korea and Japan—and throughout Northeast Asia—that accidental or intentional conflict, with the potential use of nuclear weapons, could happen.

Progress on human rights issues should be one of the core issues in any future negotiations with North Korea. It speaks to our values as a liberal democracy and world leader.

Progress on denuclearization and normalization of relations with North Korea will not only transform North Korea and improve the living conditions for its 25 million people, it will also help bring peace to the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. The only viable option for dealing with the North Korea nuclear issue is to be bold and creative.

About the Author

Ambassador Joseph R. DeTrani served over three decades with the Central Intelligence Agency as a member of the Senior Executive Service, serving as an Executive Assistant to the Director of Central Intelligence, Director of East Asia Operations, Director of European Operations, Director of the Crime and Narcotics Center, Director of the Office of Technical Services and Director of Public Affairs. He is the recipient of numerous awards and commendations for this service. He was appointed U.S. Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks with North Korea and the U.S. representative to the Korea Energy Development Organization by President George W. Bush from 2003-2006. He was an Associate Director of National Intelligence and Mission Manager for North Korea from 2006-2010 and the Director of the National Counterproliferation Center from 2010-2012, while also serving as a Special Adviser to the Director of National Intelligence. Ambassador DeTrani has served under six U.S. presidents in his roles within the intelligence and diplomatic communities. He spent over a decade overseas and speaks fluent Mandarin Chinese. Through the years, he has been an outspoken advocate for greater public-private collaboration on national security issues. He was President of the Intelligence and National Security Alliance, a professional think tank and President of the Daniel Morgan Graduate School of National Security. He served on the Board of Managers at Sandia National Laboratories and is currently on its Board of Advisers, while also on the Board of Advisers at the National Security Agency and an adjunct professor at the Graduate Department of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University. Ambassador DeTrani was an officer in the Air Force and a distinguished military graduate at New York University (NYU). He attended NYU School of Law and Graduate School of Business Administration and is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the National Committee on North Korea. He has published and spoken publicly on issues dealing with North Korea, China, Iran, cyber security, nuclear nonproliferation and international organized crime.

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