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A Cornered Dog Will Sometimes Bite

FLYING over North Korea in 1980, an American spy satellite spotted something alarming: the foundations of what would become a 5-megawatt nuclear reactor. U.S. satellites had been watching the Yongbyon area, located about 100 kilometers north of Pyongyang, since the “Corona” program successfully orbited its first photo-reconnaissance mission in 1960. Initially the satellites spotted nothing at the site except a few small buildings. By 1965 construction activity was evident. A few years later, a small nuclear research reactor, provided to North Korea by the Soviet Union, was up and running.¹ Although the reactor was not viewed as a direct threat, under Soviet pressure North Korea ultimately placed it and other related facilities under International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards, to provide assurance of their exclusively peaceful use. Throughout the 1970s, Yongbyon showed little additional activity. Then came the 1980 photographs showing the components of what appeared to be an even larger reactor near a large hole, presumably dug to accommodate its foundation.² The discovery would eventually lead to a confrontation between Pyongyang and Washington over North Korea’s nuclear weapons program.

The specter of nuclear weapons has contributed significantly to tensions and misperceptions on the peninsula ever since the Korean War. In November 1950 President Truman stated that the United States would take “whatever steps are necessary” to deter Chinese aggression, and warned that the use of nuclear weapons had been actively considered. There is evidence to suggest that Washington in subsequent months was prepared to drop these weapons

on Korean and Chinese targets if Beijing had thrown more troops into the war.³ In February 1953 President Eisenhower began dropping “discreet hints” that nuclear weapons might be used. Later that year Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told India’s leader, Jawaharal Nehru, that the United States would use “stronger rather than lesser” military means to end the war if negotiations failed. The administration hoped that this would be interpreted as an implied nuclear threat. Eisenhower and Dulles later maintained that threat was a major factor in bringing an end to the conflict.⁴

More than twenty years later, in 1975, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger publicly warned North Korea that the use of tactical nuclear weapons would be carefully considered in case of aggression.⁵ That danger may have seemed real a year later; after North Koreans killed two American soldiers, nuclear-capable bombers from Guam flew up the peninsula toward the Demilitarized Zone (“DMZ”) dividing North from South Korea. A U.S. intelligence analyst recalled that the incident “blew their . . . minds” in Pyongyang.⁶ That same year, presidential candidate Jimmy Carter asserted that the United States already had 700 atomic weapons in Korea.⁷ One observer later noted that Pyongyang might have viewed its acquisition of nuclear weapons as a necessity because the United States “had exposed North Korea, during its infancy as a nation, to the fearsome power and enormous political value of nuclear weapons.”⁸

On the surface, the North’s nuclear activities evolved in the usual way, starting with peaceful cooperation agreements. In 1956 Pyongyang and Moscow signed two agreements designed to increase cooperation; North Korean scientists began receiving extensive training on nuclear physics at the Soviet Dubna Nuclear Research Complex. In 1959 Moscow and Pyongyang agreed to set up a research center in North Korea. Established on the right bank of the Kuryong River, 8 kilometers from the town of Yongbyon, the new center was called the “furniture factory,” perhaps to hide its real purpose from the prying eyes of the outside world. In 1965, three years after a visit by Premier Alexei Kosygin, the Soviet Union delivered North Korea’s first research reactor. It entered operation around 1967.⁹

North Korea’s interest in nuclear weapons emerged from the shadows in the early 1960s. Kim Il Sung announced a new self-reliant military policy, stimulated by what he saw as Moscow’s capitulation to Washington during the Cuban missile crisis. Part of the strategy was to build deep and heavy fortifications in case of an American nuclear attack. But Pyongyang also wanted its own nuclear arsenal. In 1964 a North Korean delegation visiting China carried a letter to Mao Zedong from Kim observing that since the two communist

countries had shared the burden of war, they should also share atomic secrets. China responded that such weapons were unnecessary for a small country. Another appeal to Beijing later on was also rejected.¹⁰

Around the world, nuclear ambitions intensified in the 1970s. The 1973 oil crisis spiked international interest in nuclear energy as an alternative to dependence on the vagaries of Middle East politics. The 1974 test by India of what it disingenuously described as a “peaceful nuclear explosive”—derived from plutonium produced in a research reactor imported from Canada, with heavy water imported from the United States—demonstrated that nuclear technology acquired under the flag of peaceful nuclear cooperation could be diverted to military use. The Indian nuclear test drove American policymakers to redouble their efforts to curb worrisome nuclear efforts in a host of other nations, including Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, Pakistan, Taiwan, North Korea, South Korea, and several Middle Eastern nations.

Government decisions to pursue nuclear weapons tend to be most heavily influenced by their security environment. In South Korea, the perception of a growing threat from the North combined with President Richard Nixon’s decision to withdraw the Seventh Infantry Division led President Park Chung Hee to launch a covert program to develop a nuclear bomb. Central to this effort was an agreement to purchase a plutonium reprocessing plant from France. Under strong diplomatic pressure from the Ford administration, the South reluctantly curbed its weapons program and abandoned the reprocessing plant. U.S. pressure to block South Korean efforts to advance its nuclear weapons option continued into the Carter administration.¹¹

North Korea’s response to the altered nuclear equation in the 1970s was equally predictable. Pyongyang sought to upgrade its modest program when it negotiated with the Soviet Union for a much larger, 5-megawatt research reactor.¹² Eventually, Pyongyang decided to build the reactor itself, using its previous experience and whatever technology it could get overseas. The new gas-graphite moderated design, based on declassified British blueprints, enabled it to use natural uranium fuel which, when irradiated, served as an ideal source for weapons plutonium. Each core load would produce about 30 kilograms of plutonium—enough for about five nuclear warheads. This facility, spotted by the American spy satellite, began operation in the mid-1980s, but by then work had begun on another reactor, ten times as powerful. Belatedly, the United States pressed Moscow, as North Korea’s key ally, to exert pressure on Pyongyang to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In 1985, persuaded by a Soviet pledge to provide it with four full-size nuclear power plants, the Pyongyang government did just that.

Under the provisions of the treaty, within eighteen months of accession a new member must conclude a comprehensive safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency. This did not happen. The IAEA mistakenly sent the wrong form of agreement to North Korea, an error that was not remedied until the end of the eighteen months.¹³ It was only discovered when the North Koreans rejected the agreement as transgressing their national sovereignty. That neither North Korean, IAEA, nor U.S. officials had even bothered to look closely enough at the draft agreement to recognize such an obvious blunder demonstrates a mystifyingly lackadaisical attitude toward North Korea's nonproliferation obligations. When the correct form was finally sent to Pyongyang, a further eighteen months passed without obtaining North Korean acceptance of a safeguards agreement, much less implementation of its safeguards obligations. And when *those* eighteen months had passed, the United States prodded the IAEA but it took no serious action to press North Korea to comply with its nonproliferation commitments. The North Korean program metastasized during this period of indifference into a full-scale plutonium production effort that would require radical surgery to dismantle.

Pyongyang's drive toward nuclear weapons may also have been intensified because of its increasing sense of isolation, due in part to the widening gap between the North and South Korean economies. Per capita incomes in the South did not overtake those in the North until the mid-1970s. Year after year little changed in the North—a lonely bastion of Stalinism, insulated from the forces of change that ultimately destroyed the Soviet Union and its East European satellites. By the mid-1980s annual economic growth sputtered along at about 2 to 3 percent a year, then declined 3 to 5 percent a year beginning in 1989. With the collapse of outside economic support from Pyongyang's erstwhile communist allies—themselves shuffling into oblivion—the decline rate hit 10 to 15 percent in the early 1990s.¹⁴

The story in South Korea stood in stark contrast, as a series of politically repressive but economically dynamic leaders led Seoul to follow Japan's footsteps as the next "Asian miracle." Between 1962 and 1995 the South Korean economy expanded at an average annual rate of 8.5 percent. Its gross national product grew from \$2.3 billion to \$437.4 billion, corresponding to a per capita rise from \$87 to \$9,511 at current prices. The economic revolution coursed through many sectors; between 1980 and 1990 annual growth rates exceeded 11 percent for industry, 12 percent for manufacturing, and 8 percent for services.¹⁵ By 1992 South Korea exceeded North Korean GNP by more than a factor of 10, a gap that continued to widen as Pyongyang's economy struggled

and the South hummed along at 5 percent annual growth rates.¹⁶ And while military governments continued to rule, they had gained enough respectability to win the right to host the Summer Olympic Games in 1988.

Of equal or greater importance, North Korea's traditional allies had forever changed in ways that undermined its few pillars of foreign support. Maoist China, source of the Cultural Revolution and inspiration to the anti-imperialist opponents of the "capitalist-roaders," had given way to a more pragmatic regime that sought better relations with Seoul. The changes in the Soviet Union were more profound, as Gorbachev struggled through calibrated political and economic reform—perestroika—to keep his country from collapsing under the weight of tyranny and communist economics. In the words of the widely respected Korea expert Don Oberdorfer, the Soviet Union evolved from godfather and benefactor of North Korea to partner and client of South Korea.¹⁷ By 1991 the 38th parallel had become a lonely, isolated outpost of armed, cold war confrontation. Meeting in Pyongyang with William Taylor, a prominent American expert on Korea, the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung observed: "The world is changing all around us."¹⁸

The fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and the rapprochement between South Korea and China and the Soviet Union probably had a profound effect on North Korea's leaders. Kim Il Sung must have been alarmed by the whirlwind of events throughout the communist world, questioning whether his regime could survive the newly unleashed centripetal forces of democracy and free markets that were beginning to take root. North Korea had already begun in the mid-1980s to show signs of opening to the outside world and experimenting with its stagnating economy. By 1985 the two Koreas were engaged in a dialogue that reflected a serious and much debated policy in Pyongyang of seeking limited accommodation with Seoul and engaging the United States. At the same time, there also seemed to emerge in the leadership a group of economic "realists" who tinkered with the system to get it moving and favored some foreign entry into the economy.

Further complicating matters, Kim Il Sung was preparing for the succession of his son Kim Jong Il. The elder Kim, born in 1912 near Pyongyang, gained notoriety as a guerilla leader against Japanese occupation forces. He rose to power after World War II in the Russian-occupied half of the peninsula, becoming chairman of the Korean Workers Party in 1949. Kim would hold that position until his death in 1994, presiding over the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and called the "Great Leader" by his people. His son, Kim Jong Il, the "Dear Leader" while his father was alive, was born in 1942 in the Russian Far East. Until high school he was known by his Russian name,

Yuri. After he graduated from Kim Il Sung University, his first real job was chief of his father's bodyguards. The younger Kim seems to have begun his rise to power in 1971 in what promised to be the first communist dynasty.

That process had been under way for two decades as the younger Kim was brought up through the party ranks, giving him experience at successively higher levels of leadership and building his base of support from the bottom up. By the end of the 1980s, he had taken control of party affairs and the economy. Kim Jong Il was also increasingly influential in running North Korea's national security and foreign policy affairs—including its nuclear program—although his father still maintained some undetermined role. Conventional wisdom at the time portrayed the younger Kim as spoiled, erratic, and cruel. But other sources indicated that he appeared to take a consistent approach, supporting “economic realists,” presiding over the North's policy of limited opening to Seoul and Washington and initiatives to improve ties with Japan, Western Europe, and even Israel. In short, Kim Jong Il remained an enigma.

The First Bush administration

This was the Korean reality inherited by the new Bush administration in 1989, a reality that became more disturbing with the discovery of a reprocessing facility at Yongbyon. The rectangular building would have been hard to miss; located in a complex south of the 5-megawatt reactor, it was about the length of two football fields and six stories high. Incredibly in retrospect, some analysts posited that the building housed a production line for vinalon, a synthetic material similar to nylon, though why such a facility would be collocated with heavily protected nuclear plants was never adequately explained. On the other hand, building a reprocessing facility alongside the production reactors made great sense. The spent fuel from those units could be dissolved through reprocessing, leading to the separation of plutonium well suited for the production of nuclear weapons from the uranium and fission products contained in irradiated fuel elements.

Just as disturbing was information that North Korea might be working on a nuclear weapon design. To detonate a plutonium bomb, a hollow sphere of plutonium must be rapidly and symmetrically compressed in order to achieve a supercritical mass that would produce a significant nuclear yield. Evidence of powerful conventional explosives tests at the Yongbyon facility in the late 1980s persuaded the Bush administration that North Korea was working on an implosion-based weapon.

These developments suggested that the U.S. policy of isolating Pyongyang—which had been in place for three decades following the Korean War—could

not alone prevent North Korea from going nuclear. In that spirit, the Reagan administration had already proposed a “modest initiative” in recognition of the end of the cold war and of South Korea’s move to establish diplomatic relations with Pyongyang’s communist allies. It called for reduced restrictions on travel and contact, improved economic cooperation, diplomatic discussion, and humanitarian assistance to North Korea. The theory was that by engaging Pyongyang, it might be possible both to persuade the North to join the community of nations and to refrain from building nuclear weapons.

The Bush administration took that initiative further and launched a policy of “comprehensive engagement,” intended to inch toward better relations once North Korea abandoned its nuclear weapons development.¹⁹ The administration’s study of American policy toward Korea—National Security Review 28—proposed to achieve that goal by maintaining a strong deterrent against North Korean aggression, promoting North-South dialogue, and locking Pyongyang into its nuclear nonproliferation obligations while preventing its access to dangerous enrichment or reprocessing technologies. Another goal was to persuade North Korea to abjure terrorism and to constrain sales related to nuclear and chemical weapons as well as ballistic missiles. The prize for progress in these areas would be gradual movement toward normalized U.S.–North Korean relations.²⁰ In a bow to domestic interests and recognizing the North’s need for food assistance, the administration put in place laws allowing the export to Pyongyang of \$1.2 billion of American goods in 1991, primarily food, and medical or humanitarian equipment, even before the nuclear problem was resolved.²¹

National Security Review 28 also recognized that the reported presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in Korea would continue to dog American diplomacy. According to one nongovernmental expert, President Jimmy Carter’s strong inclination to withdraw American troops from Korea implied that tactical nuclear weapons would also be removed. But the military was divided on the wisdom of such a move. Some officers felt nuclear weapons were militarily irrelevant and only created political headaches; others believed they were essential in view of Pyongyang’s strong conventional forces. When the Carter administration backed away from withdrawing American troops, their tactical nuclear weapons stayed. Under the Bush administration respected officials such as General Robert RisCassi, the commander of U.S. forces in Korea, and Donald Gregg, ambassador to South Korea, supported their withdrawal.²² But the proposal foundered at the White House. National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft did not want to appear to reward Pyongyang’s aggressive behavior.

Another divisive issue was how far to press the North in securing an end to its nuclear program. Should the United States ask North *and* South Korea to

forswear plutonium reprocessing, and enlist Japan in that effort? One school of thought, dubbed the “arms controllers” and led by the State Department’s ambassador-at-large Richard Kennedy, advocated bringing Pyongyang into compliance with the NPT and persuading it to accept safeguards inspections conducted by the IAEA. This group resisted any steps aimed at curtailing North Korean nuclear activities *if* those steps had the collateral effect of undermining the NPT and the IAEA. Hence it opposed either asking the Koreans to forswear reprocessing or even discussing the proposal with Japan since the NPT did not proscribe that activity, which in theory could be part of a purely peaceful nuclear energy program. The issue was especially sensitive in Japan, where it was a matter of long-standing national energy policy to reprocess spent fuel from its commercial nuclear reactors, in order to extract the plutonium and recycle that material in Japanese reactors. An earlier attempt by the Carter administration to muscle Tokyo out of the plutonium fuel cycle had ended in U.S. failure and diplomatic retreat.

On the other side of the debate were the “security pragmatists,” who were less concerned with nonproliferation theology and more with blocking physical access to weapon-usable materials. They were skeptical that the NPT, enforced by the IAEA, could constrain North Korean proliferation activities. The Office of the Secretary of Defense was the most prominent member of this camp, led by Under Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz. This position also found support in the State Department, where the Political-Military Bureau tempered its concerns for maintaining the nonproliferation regime with a security pragmatism based on the same considerations as the Pentagon. The Department of State’s East Asia Bureau—its lead player on Korea—tended to favor protecting U.S. bilateral relationships over multilateral obligations that threatened to irritate those relations.

The pragmatists’ approach informed a July 1991 meeting in the office of Under Secretary of State Reginald Bartholomew to discuss American policy toward North Korea. North and South Korea were weeks away from their admission to the UN. Bartholomew and Assistant Secretary of Defense Jim Lilley agreed that the United States should press Japan to condition normalization of its own relations with Pyongyang on a North Korean pledge not to reprocess—a pledge beyond the requirements of the NPT and based on the implicit premise that the existing IAEA system was inadequate. Wolfowitz added that Washington needed a club to get North Korea’s attention. Bartholomew stressed that if the United States agreed to “pay” to persuade North Korea simply to observe its existing NPT obligations then the NPT might as well be discarded, because once one started to pay others to live up

to freely accepted international obligations there would be no stop to it. A mutually verifiable ban on reprocessing, however, would go beyond the NPT and therefore could justify some reciprocal benefit.

Since there was no way to reconcile the pragmatists' goal—denying physical access by North Korea to weapon-usable materials—with allowing reprocessing in North Korea, Washington decided to float the idea in Tokyo of a reprocessing ban in Korea. If Japan balked that such a ban would force it to curtail its own reprocessing program, the administration would reconsider. When approached by the State Department, to the happy surprise of U.S. officials, the Japanese *supported* the proposal. Evidently they were more concerned with the nuclear threat from Korea than with preserving the principle that plutonium reprocessing was not only legal but also an appropriate way to close the nuclear fuel cycle.

There Do Not Exist Any Nuclear Weapons Whatsoever

As the Korean nuclear situation grew ever more worrisome, the international community continued its process of radical transformation. In 1989 the Berlin Wall had fallen, and Czechoslovakia had regained its liberty in the Velvet Revolution. In August 1991, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was seized at his dacha in Sochi, near the Black Sea, by conspirators bent on restoring traditional communist discipline in reaction to the libertinage and uncertainties of perestroika. The attempted coup ultimately failed, but the crumbling Soviet Union was destined to vanish before the New Year, a victim of the internal contradictions of a communist ideology that sought to build a society and a government upon a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature.

The cold war effectively over, leaders were left with the question: what role should nuclear weapons retain in a post-cold war era? Administration officials argued over how to respond to the unfolding events. As President Bush later wrote, the “overriding debate within the administration remained what we wanted to see emerge, and how best to make the most of the greatly increased influence of the reformers while we could.”²³ A central concern that required urgent attention with the breakup of the Soviet Union was the fate of the collapsing superpower’s nuclear arsenal.

On September 27, 1991, shortly after the attempted Soviet coup, President Bush announced the unilateral withdrawal of all U.S. ground-launched tactical nuclear weapons around the world, calling on the Soviets to reciprocate. This path-breaking confidence-building measure would constitute an important diplomatic gesture to the Soviet leaders, while substantially reducing the

threat that conventional conflict could somehow escalate to nuclear holocaust.²⁴ According to Don Oberdorfer, President Bush also secretly ordered the removal of all nuclear weapons in South Korea delivered by aircraft.²⁵

The president's stunning initiative triggered a burst of diplomatic progress on the Korean Peninsula. As North-South relations gathered momentum, by December 1991 the prime ministers of the two Koreas negotiated a mutual nonaggression pact, each pledging to avoid interference in the internal affairs of the other. Prodded by the United States, President Roh Tae Woo followed the Bush announcement with his own proposal, pledging to refrain from plutonium reprocessing as well as from the manufacture, possession, or storage of nuclear weapons. But the dam broke when Roh stated, "As I speak, there do not exist any nuclear weapons whatsoever, anywhere in the Republic of Korea."²⁶ President Bush artfully skirted long-standing U.S. policy to neither confirm nor deny the presence or absence of nuclear weapons at any place and time: "I heard what [he] said and I'm not about to argue with him."²⁷

By the last day of 1991, the surge of nuclear diplomacy had produced the North-South Denuclearization Declaration (NSDD). Though proliferation concerns had to date focused on the plutonium path to weapons, the White House urged that the evolving draft of the NSDD be modified also to include a ban on uranium enrichment, another path to building the bomb. In the end, the NSDD codified the Roh initiative and proscribed both plutonium reprocessing and uranium enrichment on the Korean Peninsula, shutting down both principal avenues to nuclear weapons manufacture, at least on paper.²⁸

The Denuclearization Declaration represented a double victory for the security pragmatists. First, it represented a symbolic victory over the arms controllers, by curtailing the freedom that both Koreas otherwise would have enjoyed as NPT parties: the right to enrich uranium and separate plutonium provided these activities were undertaken under IAEA safeguards. Second, it represented a victory for muscular American diplomacy over the preferences of both North and South Korea, who never would have concluded the NSDD—with its enrichment and reprocessing bans—without U.S. encouragement.

Aside from agreeing to the Denuclearization Declaration, in December 1991 Pyongyang also ended five years of heel dragging by announcing its intention to sign its long-overdue IAEA safeguards agreement once the United States confirmed there were no American nuclear weapons in Korea. For its part, the United States signaled quietly to the North through talks between its diplomats in the Chinese capital, the "Beijing channel," and elsewhere that if Pyongyang took that step it would be rewarded with a high-level meeting with a senior American diplomat. The North had sought such contact for years, not only to foster an improved bilateral relationship, but also as a mark

of respect and an opportunity to drive a wedge between the United States and South Korea.

The United States kept the momentum going when President Bush visited Seoul in the first week of 1992, offering to cancel the annual Team Spirit military exercise for that year once Pyongyang redeemed its pledge to sign its safeguards agreement. Called “our Super Bowl” by one U.S. officer, Team Spirit began in 1976 after the Vietnam withdrawal to reassure South Korea and bolster deterrence against the North. The exercise often involved hundreds of thousands of troops and, some suspected, even nuclear weapons.²⁹ Not surprisingly, North Korea viewed Team Spirit as a dress rehearsal for an invasion.

Team Spirit’s utility had been hotly debated in the United States. Many senior military officers had considered eliminating it since other exercises could accomplish the same objectives at far lower cost and less political clamor from the North. The skeptics seemed to be making headway when, on January 7, after consultations between South Korean and American officials, Seoul announced that Team Spirit would be canceled for that year. In order to maintain pressure on North Korea, however, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney took other steps to ensure a strong military posture in the South, including delaying the planned withdrawal of 6,000 U.S. troops from the peninsula and enlarging other military exercises.³⁰

In a further, unprecedented move, two days later National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft announced that the United States and North Korea would hold direct talks later that month.³¹ Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Arnold Kanter, the third-ranking official in the Department of State, would lead the U.S. delegation. Kanter, whose government service began in 1977, first at State and then at the National Security Council (NSC), held a doctorate from Yale. Before entering government, he had worked at think tanks—the RAND Corporation and the Brookings Institution—and had been a university professor. His counterpart was Kim Yong Sun, the Worker’s Party secretary for international affairs. The six-foot-tall Kim—humorous, charming, and quite polished—had at one point in his career been sent to a coal mine for teaching his colleagues Western dances. Now, after rising through the diplomatic ranks, he appeared to have more influence than the North Korean foreign minister, courtesy of his close relationship with Kim Jong Il.

Preparations for those talks had, in fact, been under way throughout late 1991. The head of the State Department’s Korea Desk—Charles Kartman—and an officer stationed at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations—Danny Russel—had been meeting with a North Korean official stationed in New York—Ho Jong—sometimes in a basement conference room at the United

Nations. (All three would later play important roles in the nuclear crisis.) The back and forth, which continued for some time, was both novel and significant enough to lead the State Department to take great care in how Washington's positions were presented. Kartman would dictate verbatim over the telephone the phrases Russel was supposed to use with the North Koreans. One participant recalled that "it seemed that we were more orthodox than the North Koreans! I suspect the concern was not to upgrade from the Beijing channel until the North Koreans had earned it, so we were being careful to make sure only non-substantive administrative details were discussed."³²

During preparations for the Kanter-Kim meeting, differences surfaced once again, this time between those who believed that diplomacy offered the best path to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons option and those who believed that Pyongyang would see direct talks as a sign of weakness and an opportunity to disrupt solidarity with South Korea. Agencies wrestled over every point and nuance in Kanter's draft presentation, producing a carefully negotiated document.

Kanter's presentation was based, according to one American participant, on the "good-doggie, bad-doggie" principle. If North Korea complied fully with its nonproliferation obligations, including full implementation of the recently signed Denuclearization Declaration, it could look forward to a future of greater communication and commerce with the United States and the rest of the international community.³³ But the inability of U.S. agencies to agree on exactly how many benefits to open to the North prevented Kanter from being too specific about the bright future. The U.S. position excluded even mentioning the possibility of "normalization" of bilateral relations. The choice between dialogue and confrontation, concluded Kanter, lay with Pyongyang.

Not surprisingly, Pyongyang declined to accept that burden; the U.S. promise of greater communication and commerce was so vague and intangible that it held little to attract North Korean cooperation. At the same time, the North Koreans—having witnessed the collapse of East Germany and Romania through greater exposure to the freedom and prosperity of Western Europe—viewed Kanter's vision with some ambivalence, if not downright fear. In his presentation, Kim Yong Sun, also appearing to hew closely to a script, laid the responsibility for the tensions dividing Korea at the doorstep of the Americans and their South Korean and Japanese allies. Aside from proposing that both Koreas and the United States work together to deal with the greatest danger in Asia—namely, Japan—the North Korean negotiator pressed unsuccessfully for further meetings between the two sides.

But Kim also dropped some tantalizing hints. He said point blank that North Korea would have no objections to U.S. troops remaining on the peninsula even

after national unification, citing the Japanese again as an important consideration. The Americans—used to years of North Korean rhetoric aimed at ending their military alliance with Seoul and pushing them off the peninsula—were surprised.

Not an inspiring encounter, the New York meeting was significant for occurring at all, while the tone—if somewhat stiff and restrained—was not outwardly hostile. The United States, having delivered the promised high-level meeting, now saw North Korea do its part. After Pyongyang initialed IAEA safeguards and ratified the agreement in April, Director General Hans Blix (later head of the UN inspection effort in Iraq) paid a six-day visit to North Korea to tour the facilities that now would be subject to inspection. Subsequently he told the U.S. Congress that Pyongyang was cooperating, but any definitive judgments about its nuclear program were several months away. His caution would prove justified.³⁴

Stalling Out: Three Blind Alleys

Though no one knew it at the time, the Blix visit represented a high-water mark of cooperation as the peninsula now began to tip toward crisis. By the end of 1992, every avenue that had opened to new promise following the Bush nuclear initiative of September 1991—North Korean channels with the South, IAEA, and the United States, respectively—had narrowed and closed. For some time, positive momentum continued; for instance, the North-South meeting of prime ministers in September 1992 made further progress in promoting reconciliation. But talks held under the auspices of the Joint Nuclear Control Commission slowly ground to a halt, failing to resolve any of the contentious inspection issues related to verification of the North-South Denuclearization Declaration.

The issue of inspections was also souring Pyongyang's budding relationship with the IAEA. In its May 1992 declaration to the IAEA—required from states entering a safeguards agreement—the North confirmed the existence of a reprocessing plant at Yongbyon and the separation of 90 grams of plutonium two years earlier from damaged reactor fuel, an action it characterized as a scientific experiment. But inspections in July and September began to reveal some discrepancies in the declaration. Scientific analysis of the data gathered during these visits showed that North Korea recovered more batches of plutonium than it had declared and that reprocessing occurred over a much longer period of time than Pyongyang had admitted. As IAEA director general Blix pressed for access to additional sites and information to help solve the mystery, tensions rose between Vienna and Pyongyang.³⁵

For the IAEA, the growing challenge of North Korea was an important test of its own credibility. Only a few years earlier, the Gulf War had revealed that a covert nuclear weapons program existed in Iraq despite IAEA inspections of Baghdad's known nuclear facilities. The soul-searching that followed in Vienna produced a number of innovations. One was an emphasis on an already existing but never used right of "special inspections," which meant the IAEA could seek to visit declared and undeclared locations and facilities if evidence suggested they held nuclear material. Although such inspections were still a last resort, the agency was not going to make the same mistake with North Korea that it had made with Iraq. Moreover, the IAEA's determination was only reinforced by the contrasting experience with South Africa, which had recently revealed the existence of its nuclear weapons program and was cooperating in coming clean.³⁶

The slowing of progress with the IAEA and South Korea blocked the last avenue for meaningful dialogue: talks with the United States. In September, as hope for progress dimmed, Kim Yong Sun sent a letter to Under Secretary Kanter through the Beijing channel trying to arrange another bilateral meeting. While Kim predictably patted his country on the back, noting that Pyongyang had opened its facilities to the IAEA, he blamed the South's intransigence for the lack of progress on the bilateral nuclear inspection regime. Kanter called the proposal "interesting" but, also predictably, rejected talks absent progress on North-South inspections and cooperation with the IAEA.

Chafing under the IAEA's scrutiny, thwarted in its desire for talks with Washington, and pressed to accept inspections by South Korea, the North was about to experience yet another blow: the resumption of the Team Spirit exercise. While the United States and South Korea had insisted that the suspension of Team Spirit 1992 was an isolated decision unlinked to future exercises, the North had vigorously urged that the suspension become permanent. The South Koreans, however, were so exasperated with the deepening stalemate that they favored going ahead with Team Spirit 1993. At the annual Security Consultative Meeting held in early October 1992, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney agreed, since the Pentagon was reluctant to get into a dispute with South Korea. But some wiggle room remained. Although the communiqué issued after the annual meeting stated that preparations for the 1993 exercise would continue, a final decision would not be made until December or January.³⁷ Unassuaged, Pyongyang blasted the decision. Donald Gregg, the U.S. ambassador to Seoul, called the move "one of the biggest mistakes" of American policy toward Korea.³⁸

Making matters worse, the day before the Team Spirit announcement, South Korea declared it had uncovered a massive North Korean spy ring. Employing a sure-fire tool to inflame Pyongyang, the South's intelligence agency claimed

that the North was employing some 400 agents in the South to cause agitation and disrupt politics.³⁹ The announcement may have been a deliberate attempt by South Korean intelligence to slow the pace of nuclear diplomacy and by the campaign managers of presidential candidate Kim Young Sam's ruling party to prevent better relations with the North. Electoral politics also may have played a role; a staff member of his opponent, Kim Dae Jung, was arrested in the affair. In any case, once the scandal broke, President Roh canceled a trip to North Korea by senior economic officials in his government. The chilling effect on inter-Korean relations was unmistakable.⁴⁰

The twin blows of the resumption of Team Spirit and the spy scandal produced predictable results. Within weeks North Korea suspended all contacts with Seoul, with the exception of the Joint Nuclear Control Commission, where the two countries continued to spar over an inspection regime for the Denuclearization Declaration. The North also threatened to suspend IAEA inspections, but its warnings were by and large ignored. Charles Kartman, the State Department Korean country director, recalled that the "advantages of using Team Spirit as a club appealed to many people, and the advantages of satisfying South Korean demands that we use a club were obvious." While he and others argued that this was counterproductive, Kartman wryly observed that "the voice of caution was rather low level."⁴¹

On the eve of the 1992 presidential elections in the United States and South Korea, the East Asian Policy Coordinating Committee (PCC) of the National Security Council, chaired by Assistant Secretary of State William Clark, took stock of the Bush administration's policy. The October 28 meeting reaffirmed the conclusions of National Security Review 28: cautious engagement and not isolation of North Korea would best advance American goals. The members of the committee agreed that the nuclear issue should be the first order of business, followed by resolution of the problem of North Korea's missile exports. Once the nuclear problem was solved, a U.S.–North Korean political-level dialogue could begin. Washington also could consider phasing out selected economic sanctions, starting with the Trading with the Enemy Act, which had become law after the Korean War and was designed to cut off all economic contact with Pyongyang. In short, the administration seemed to believe that once short-term problems were resolved, its policy of engagement would continue to move forward.

Steady as She Goes

On November 4, William Jefferson Clinton was elected the forty-second president of the United States. In South Korea, former opposition leader Kim Young Sam emerged victorious from elections on December 18. Looking

ahead, the State Department predicted that the coming to power of the two new presidents, and the ongoing transition of power to Kim Jong Il in North Korea, would likely lead to a period of adjustment and a “feeling out” of one another in the first half of 1993.

As the two presidents prepared to take office, the outgoing Deputies Committee met just before Christmas to discuss Korea. Since the Policy Coordinating Committee had met two months earlier, the situation had continued to deteriorate. The intense North Korean reaction to the resumption of the Team Spirit exercise had paralyzed the already sluggish inter-Korean negotiations concerning a bilateral nuclear inspection regime. The North had refused to grant the IAEA access to a site called “Building 500,” which stored nuclear waste that might help establish whether North Korea had separated more plutonium than it had declared. If its efforts continued to fall short of the mark, the agency planned to hold a special Board of Governors meeting and then to refer the nuclear issue to the UN Security Council.⁴² In November, Washington rebuffed a proposal by North Korea’s deputy ambassador to the United Nations, Ho Jong, for another Kanter-Kim session, again insisting that the North first meet its nonproliferation obligations.

Concerned but not alarmed, the Deputies Committee, consisting of senior officials just a step below cabinet level, discussed reducing or delaying Team Spirit to allow the new administration to decide whether or not to hold the exercise. But changes at this late date would be logistically difficult. It seemed more practical to use public diplomacy to deflect the North’s attempts to blame the United States and South Korea for the stalemate. In the end, the deputies agreed on a “steady as she goes” approach; once the new administrations in Washington and Seoul took office and Team Spirit concluded, they believed the situation would calm. But in Seoul, a South Korean official warned a visiting American that “a cornered dog will sometimes bite in addition to barking.”

“Steady as she goes” also seemed to describe the course plotted by Pyongyang. While Washington, Seoul, and Vienna tried to nudge the nonproliferation agenda forward, for the second year in a row Kim Il Sung’s annual New Year’s address did not betray any deep concerns over the nuclear issue. Refraining from direct criticism of the United States and South Korea, Kim Il Sung offered to meet with anyone who takes a “sincere” stand on reunification “without questioning his or her past.” He also called on other countries, the United States, and Japan, to help solve problems on the peninsula. The speech came at a time when Pyongyang was sending officials to Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East to break out of its isolation and to improve trade ties given the food shortages and economic problems that bedeviled North Korea.

While Kim Il Sung's conciliatory foreign policy stance was coupled with an airing of conservative domestic political themes that may have been meant to appease hard line elements, there were no signs that the North was preparing for an impending crisis. To the contrary, officials believed to favor greater opening to the outside world had received promotions at a meeting of the Supreme People's Assembly held a few weeks earlier. Indeed, in January the North Koreans announced a greater emphasis on light industry, in an effort to raise the standard of living and to prepare for at least some economic restructuring.⁴³ U.S. government analysts speculated that Kim Jong Il, more like Gorbachev than Yeltsin, wanted to tinker with the status quo while preserving the system.

On January 21, 1993, incoming national security adviser Anthony ("Tony") Lake convened the NSC staff in Room 208 of the Old Executive Office Building. Lake had served as a young Foreign Service officer in Saigon in 1963 and first joined the NSC staff in 1969 as a special assistant to then national security adviser Henry Kissinger, before resigning in protest over the secret bombing of Cambodia. During the Carter administration he returned to government as the director of policy planning at the State Department, and spent most of the 1980s teaching and writing about foreign policy. Beneath his amiable demeanor and dry sense of humor lay a sharp intellect, deep knowledge of history, and a keen sense of the use of power.

After a few remarks about the new president's foreign policy, Lake introduced the senior staff. One official who was to play a key role in the unfolding crisis was Deputy National Security Adviser Samuel R. ("Sandy") Berger, a longtime associate of the new president and a successful trade lawyer in Washington, D.C. Berger had been Lake's deputy on the State Department's Policy Planning Staff under President Carter and would later succeed him as national security adviser. He had a keen intellect, an intuitive sense of the art of the possible, and a seemingly endless capacity for work. Next to Berger sat Leon Fuerth, a former Foreign Service officer who had helped Al Gore become one of the Senate's leading arms control experts. Fuerth's insights and creativity would contribute significantly to the administration's Korea policy throughout the crisis.

Lake invited the senior directors to highlight critical issues facing the new administration. North Korea was near but not at the top of the new administration's busy nonproliferation agenda. Daniel Poneman was one of the few holdovers from the Bush administration. Also a lawyer by training, Poneman had served in the Department of Energy for a year before joining the NSC staff to work on nonproliferation issues under Senior Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control Arnold Kanter, before Kanter moved over to the State Department as under secretary. The incoming Clinton administration

decided to establish a separate office for Non-Proliferation and Export Controls and appointed Poneman as its first senior director.

When his turn came, Poneman first addressed the cluster of proliferation issues relating to Russia but then turned to North Korea, reporting that IAEA inspectors were at that moment on the ground at Yongbyon; a special Board of Governors meeting would likely be held in February to address the North Korean issue. On January 26, Poneman told Lake that the critical question of the day was whether the announcement reaffirming that Team Spirit would be held would in turn lead Pyongyang to throw out the IAEA inspectors who were still completing their work. If not, he predicted that the next critical point would be reached in two to three weeks, when the IAEA Board of Governors would take up the issue.

The initial steps of the new Clinton administration maintained continuity with the approach of its predecessor, though they were hardly calculated to win hearts and minds in North Korea. The administration did not revisit, much less reverse, Defense Secretary Cheney's agreement to conduct the Team Spirit exercise in 1993. Moreover, Under Secretary Kanter's interlocutor from the high-level talks of January 1992—Kim Yong Sun—and five other members of a delegation that was planning to participate in a February 3 meeting of parliamentarians in Washington were denied visas.⁴⁴ The decision came as a disappointment to some State Department officials who were hoping somehow to jump-start relations with Pyongyang by allowing Kim to come to Washington.⁴⁵

In part, the continuity in U.S. policy resulted from inertia; the Clinton administration was still getting organized. As was customary since the Kennedy administration, the president had quickly issued a number of directives, launching a series of policy reviews that aimed to shape the new administration's policy and, implicitly, to foster the interagency consensus and teamwork that would be critical to their effective implementation. Among the earliest of these reviews were Presidential Review Directive 8, the nonproliferation policy review chaired by Poneman, and a separate review of East Asian policy, chaired by Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs William Clark. He was also a holdover from the Bush administration, as was Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Robert Gallucci, who would later emerge as the administration's point man on North Korea. Indeed, many of the key decisionmakers on North Korea had been working on the problem during the Bush administration.

Continuity was not only the result of a need to get organized. Strong backing for the IAEA would be critical to a president who had campaigned on the need to elevate nonproliferation to the top of the national security agenda.

Other elements of the Bush policy—a strong commitment to the security of South Korea, close coordination with Seoul and Tokyo, and careful diplomacy to enlist Pyongyang’s traditional friends in Beijing and Moscow in rolling back the North Korean nuclear program—would have seemed equally natural to Republicans or Democrats. The first interagency meetings on the evolving standoff elicited a consistent response: North Korea must comply with its nonproliferation obligations, including not only IAEA special inspections but also the inspections required by its agreement with South Korea. Some thought was given to whether it was wise to allow the conflict with the IAEA to come to a head during the Team Spirit exercise; Japan believed the confluence of the two might provoke an especially negative North Korean reaction. But the standard (albeit erroneous) wisdom was the situation would cool down once Team Spirit was over.

Events already set in motion by the time President Clinton assumed office appeared to follow an inexorable course. In late January, following the announcement reaffirming that Team Spirit would be held as scheduled, Hans Blix issued his first request ever for special inspections. Then talks at the end of the month in Pyongyang between the IAEA and North Koreans made no progress, prompting Blix to call for a special Board of Governors meeting to endorse his request.⁴⁶

The agency tried one last time to make progress when North Korea’s minister of atomic energy, Choi Hak Gun, visited Vienna the weekend of February 20–21. During ten hours of meetings, Blix made every effort to give the North Koreans an opportunity to address the problem with their plutonium production declaration, even warning that at its upcoming meeting the board would be shown satellite pictures of North Korea trying to hide nuclear activities. But Choi would not budge. Although the IAEA inspectors had considered taking the North Koreans to lunch in town since most restaurants nearby were closed on weekends, a frustrated Blix told his team, “No agreement, no lunch.”⁴⁷

As its differences with the IAEA came into sharper focus, it was unclear whether Pyongyang was mobilizing for a crisis. Its initial posture of preparing the North Korean populace for progress in ties with the United States and South Korea shifted somewhat after the January 26 Team Spirit announcement. The next day, the North Korean Foreign Ministry issued a statement that moved its differences with the IAEA into the open and seemed to throw some cold water on hopes for a diplomatic solution. It claimed that the United States could not escape responsibility for preventing North Korea from fulfilling its obligations under the NPT and that Team Spirit was a “nuclear threat” contradictory to the treaty. Some inferred that Pyongyang might be able to

fulfill its obligations once the exercise was over.⁴⁸ There were also signs Pyongyang wanted to avoid derailing efforts to improve ties with the United States and South Korea. In an unusual, carefully calculated gesture, the statement contained an unattributed quotation from Clinton's inaugural address, suggesting that the North was paying close attention to the new administration's pronouncements.⁴⁹

But a showdown had become inevitable. In mid-February, Seoul's ambassador to the United States, Hyun Hong Choo, met with Lake, Poneman, and NSC director for Asian affairs, Torkel Patterson, at the White House. Lake mused that the North Koreans may have thought that merely accepting inspections would have been enough to satisfy the international community. But now that the IAEA had actually caught them in a deception, the North seemed unable to find a way out of the box. And Hans Blix, determined not to repeat the agency's embarrassment over its failure in Iraq, insisted on pressing for special inspections once North Korea's lack of cooperation had become clear.

On February 22, the thirty-five member states of the IAEA Board of Governors met in an extraordinary closed session to look at satellite photographs showing the apparent nuclear waste sites where the IAEA sought access. The scene was reminiscent of the UN Security Council session held during the Cuban Missile Crisis three decades earlier, when U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson unveiled photos of Soviet missiles in Cuba. This was the first time that the agency had used intelligence information from a member state in such a graphic way. It was an extraordinary sight, as IAEA officials displayed grainy black-and-white photographs taken from space to the assembled representatives, including those of countries (such as Libya) known to be interested in acquiring their own nuclear weapons.

The United States had quietly begun briefing the IAEA at the end of 1992 on developments at Yongbyon using satellite photography. Central Intelligence Agency analysts had battled the State Department to prevent disclosure of the photographs. Finally, CIA director Robert Gates had authorized the disclosure to strengthen the international case against North Korea, a decision that the incoming administration sustained. Now, as IAEA officials and representatives peered at the photographs, they saw a storage facility under construction and what appeared to be an older facility at the Yongbyon nuclear complex being covered with a mound of dirt, which then appeared with trees and shrubs planted on top. The implication was obvious; North Korea seemed to have buried some nuclear waste under the camouflaged mound and built a newer facility to serve as a decoy.

The North Korean delegation soldiered on despite the damning evidence, but Blix argued that information obtained from a member state could not be ignored if relevant to IAEA implementation of its responsibilities under the

safeguards agreement. Moreover, the North Korean explanations did not clear up the inconsistencies between their declaration and the IAEA inspectors' own observations. In fact, explanations for some discrepancies made sense but did not change the final assessment that the North's declaration was wrong. The agency chose, in the words of one IAEA official, to "express certainty" about its analysis since the North could claim that if Pyongyang was right about one minor inconsistency, the IAEA was wrong about others.⁵⁰

Faced with a solidly documented case and a North Korean rebuttal that left the central evidence unchallenged, the board adopted a resolution on February 25 calling on North Korea to comply with its IAEA safeguards obligations within one month. The resolution contained two compromises that were required to secure China's support, since Beijing was loath to put too much pressure on its traditional ally. First, the North Koreans were given one month to comply, essentially allowing them to resume their cooperation with the IAEA after the Team Spirit exercise had concluded. Second, the resolution did not require North Korea to agree to "special inspections," but rather only to grant the IAEA access to the two sites.

Blix immediately telexed the text to Pyongyang along with a request for an inspection beginning on March 16. The North Koreans ominously warned that the new situation would require them to take countermeasures of self-defense to safeguard their sovereignty and supreme national interests.⁵¹ That statement, in retrospect, seemed to refer to the prospect of North Korea exercising the "supreme national interest" clause in the NPT in order to withdraw from the treaty.

The Sunshine Policy

The IAEA resolution could not have come at a worse time for the new South Korean government. Only the day before, Kim Young Sam had taken office as president. Born in 1927 on Koje Island off southern Korea, Kim was a long-time politician, opposition leader, and dissident. In a political masterstroke, he had merged his opposition party with the ruling party of President Roh Tae Woo, which led to his nomination and eventual election over longtime rival Kim Dae Jung. As president, Kim would be a driving force for change, entering office with a vision of a "New Korea" built on the promise of sweeping political, economic, and social reform.

The new president had a flair for daring political moves and a sensitivity to public opinion. One of Kim's first speaking forays was in the cafeteria of the Agency for National Security Planning (NSP), South Korea's seemingly ubiquitous intelligence service, which had dogged him for many years. Kim would later boast that he had hired for his own staff a policeman who had spent a

decade watching him. By his own admission, he was more a politician than an intellectual, claiming that he “borrowed other people’s brains.” This led some South Koreans to joke that Kim “borrowed too many people’s brains,” which explained why his policies were inconsistent.

More comfortable with domestic politics than foreign policy, Kim had conservative views on North Korea that may have been influenced by the fact that its agents, in committing an armed robbery, had killed his mother four decades earlier.⁵² On the other hand, the new president surrounded himself with advisers drawn from outside the bureaucracy, who were not tainted by connections to past military regimes. Academics with views ranging from progressive to moderate, Kim’s “Gang of Four” was at the center of his foreign policy team.

Of the four, Han Sung Joo, the new foreign minister, would play Kissinger to President Kim’s Nixon. A well-known professor at Korea University with a doctorate from the University of California at Berkeley, Han had taught in New York City and then returned to Seoul. He had been a government adviser on North-South relations and written extensively on that subject, the United States, and foreign policy, both as an academic and as a columnist for *Newsweek*. He was soft spoken, thoughtful, and even bookish. Han would emerge as the most influential voice in shaping South Korean policy during the nuclear crisis.⁵³

President Kim’s most controversial appointment was Han Wan Sang, the new deputy prime minister and unification minister. A former campus radical and dissident, Han was also a ruffled academic who believed that real North-South dialogue would only take place if Pyongyang had confidence that Seoul was neither trying to change nor absorb it. According to Han, because of South Korea’s strength, it was in a position to make bold gestures that would convince the North Koreans of its sincerity.⁵⁴ Years later, he would recall his efforts as the first attempt at a “sunshine policy” toward North Korea, a phrase that would subsequently become famous in describing President Kim Dae Jung’s policies toward Pyongyang.⁵⁵

The new foreign policy team was rounded off by two additional academics turned policymakers. The first, Chung Chong Wook, was a professor at Seoul National University before being tapped for the job of Blue House national security adviser. A “moderate centrist,” he was viewed by some critics as being too pro-American. The second, Kim Deok, was the first academic appointed head of South Korea’s intelligence organization. Previous directors had been either senior military officials or government prosecutors.

During the South Korean presidential transition, the incoming government’s policy toward North Korea remained unclear. But change was in the

air. That became apparent with President Kim's inaugural address on February 24. In a dramatic pronouncement, the president acknowledged that "no allied country can be greater than one nation" and said he was willing to meet Kim Il Sung "any time and any place."⁵⁶ Its implication that ties with Pyongyang were more important than those with the United States set off a firestorm of conservative criticism. While Han Wan Sang's hand was clear—he had led the team that worked on the text for over a month—the president-elect was also deeply involved, frequently attending drafting sessions. Almost immediately, a private emissary from the North visited Han to tell him that Pyongyang had been favorably impressed.⁵⁷

A second initiative undertaken by the new government was to approve the release of Lee In Mo, a North Korean war correspondent and guerilla captured during the Korean War. Lee had been imprisoned for steadfastly refusing to do the one thing—renounce communism—that could win him a return ticket to the North. Though released from jail in 1989, his unconditional repatriation to North Korea had been considered but rejected by the previous government. After being held in captivity for almost four decades, the elderly Lee was hospitalized in February 1993, prompting the North Korean Red Cross Society bitterly to denounce the South's treatment of him and to urge his transfer to "our side."⁵⁸

Meeting with President Kim over breakfast shortly after the inauguration, Han Wan Sang asked him to make another bold gesture: unconditionally release Lee. Such a move made sense because it would be hard for South Korea to explain to the world why Lee had not been allowed to go home to die, and also because it fit into Han's "sunshine" strategy.⁵⁹ A week later, Seoul announced that the seventy-six-year-old Lee would be returned to North Korea unconditionally, characterizing its move as a "courageous political decision."⁶⁰

But the new government in Seoul recognized that without a diplomatic solution to the nuclear problem its emerging policy of reconciliation stood little chance of success. After the inauguration, Deputy Prime Minister Han mused in a television interview that a North-South summit could occur by the end of the year, once Team Spirit was over and the nuclear issue resolved. Yet such a solution would be impossible without the active participation of the United States.⁶¹

As Seoul began its policy review, it dispatched a veteran diplomat, Gong Ro Myung, to Washington for discussions beginning March 8. Ambassador Gong was ideally suited for the mission. Viewed by the Americans as well informed, he had a sophisticated English vocabulary, honed by regular reading of the *New York Times*. After serving as his country's first ambassador to the Soviet Union, Gong had spent the past year as head of its delegation to the Joint

Nuclear Control Commission charged with negotiating a verification regime for the Denuclearization Declaration. That experience had given him a keen understanding of North Korea's behavior born of frequent face-to-face contacts.

After consulting with the new president and foreign minister, Gong came to Washington armed with three ideas. One was fairly mundane, to propose another session of the Joint Nuclear Control Commission. The second was new, to kill two birds with one stone by allowing the IAEA to carry out not only its own inspections but also inspections under the North-South inspection regime, on the dubious premise that Pyongyang would prefer the agency to South Korea. The third idea, familiar but controversial, was that the United States should agree to North Korea's persistent requests for another high-level meeting like the Kanter-Kim session. That might help forestall any rash action by Pyongyang, including withdrawal from the NPT. "Let them bask in glory so we can pump them to do the right thing," Gong told the Americans.

Seoul's envoy was under no illusions. He understood there would be strong reticence in Washington to another high-level session with the North Koreans, but thought it worthwhile putting the idea on the table.⁶² Gong met with all the key players in the new administration: Anthony Lake, Under Secretary of State Peter Tarnoff, Assistant Secretary for East Asia William Clark, and Assistant Secretary for Political-Military Affairs Robert Gallucci. Most listened politely while telling him that the United States was reviewing its policy. But Assistant Secretary Clark pointed out that the North Koreans were still signaling a commitment to work with the IAEA. Agreeing to a U.S.–North Korean meeting would send the wrong signal to Pyongyang and detract from the objective of achieving the IAEA inspection. As Gong would later recall, "Everyone was working on the March 25 deadline," the one-month period given to Pyongyang to comply with the IAEA's wishes.

In fact, Pyongyang seemed to have a different timetable. On March 8, as Gong was meeting with American officials, Kim Jong Il issued "Order No. 0034 of the Supreme Military Commander." Denouncing Team Spirit as a "nuclear war game preliminary to invasion of North Korea," he ordered the people and the military to enter a state of semiwar and to be fully prepared for battle. Pyongyang had increased the alert status of its military forces before in response to Team Spirit, although the last time it had used the term "semiwar" was in 1983. The announcement made no mention of the dispute with the IAEA.⁶³

The next day, 100,000 workers, students, and citizens, as well as top members of the North Korean leadership, attended a huge rally in Pyongyang. Afterward, participants marched in a parade carrying banners proclaiming, "Let Us Unite around the Supreme Commander." A dusk-to-dawn blackout

was ordered. Radio Moscow reported, "Even the torchlight on the *Juche*-Thought Tower was turned off." (*Juche* is the North Korean doctrine of "self-reliance" that Kim Il Sung built into the dominant political credo of his totalitarian state.) Pyongyang also stopped issuing visas to foreigners and began jamming Korean language broadcasts of Radio Japan, a step it had never taken before.⁶⁴

Although the situation appeared to be deteriorating, Washington and Seoul remained calm. Ambassador William Clark sent a memorandum on the subject to the newly confirmed secretary of state, Warren Christopher. Christopher had had a long and distinguished career in and outside government, including service as deputy attorney general in the Johnson administration and deputy secretary of state in the Carter administration. He was no stranger to crisis, having negotiated the January 1981 release of the fifty-two American hostages in Iran. The memorandum from Clark told him that the declaration denouncing the Team Spirit exercise was fairly typical. There was, he added "very little reason for serious concern" since the move did not represent an actual increase in the military threat.

On his way home from Washington, Ambassador Gong stopped in Tokyo to consult with the Japanese government. Getting off the airplane at Narita airport, he was met by his country's ambassador to Japan, a courtesy normally reserved for a visiting South Korean foreign minister or president. A puzzled Gong asked, "Why are you here?" His friend replied, "North Korea has withdrawn from the NPT."⁶⁵