



THE KOREA PROJECT | JULY 2021

A Historical Review of the U.S. Intelligence Community's Role in Dealing with North Korea

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PRACTITIONER OBSERVATIONS SERIES, ISSUE NO. 1

Introduction

North Korea has maintained a hostile attitude towards the United States since its inception and has isolated itself from the rest of the world. The lack of communication and limited information about the country hindered U.S. policymakers over the years, as they struggled to make progress on relations with the North. They came to rely more and more on U.S. agencies' intelligence and analysis of North Korea. The U.S. Intelligence Community's (USIC) understanding of North Korea deepened each time the U.S. officials met with their North Korean counterparts. The USIC took advantage of limited engagement as windows to study behaviors, demeanors, perceptions and biases of North Korea, and compiled lessons learned from one generation of experts to the next. Although this accumulated knowledge is valuable, a large intelligence gap remains.

History

From the initial split of the Korean Peninsula following World War II to today, the USIC's role in dealing with North Korea has expanded. The USIC's priorities regarding North Korea changed during this time as well, as the North transformed from a limited regional threat to a larger and more direct threat to the United States.

In 1948, the establishment of the North and South Korean governments above and below the 38th parallel resulted in the division of the Korean Peninsula. The USIC has been closely monitoring Pyongyang's plans and intentions since its creation as a Soviet client state. The USIC in its early days focused more on estimating the political stability of South Korea's fragile democracy, rather than potential threats from North Korea. In the spring and summer of 1950, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported increasing indications of conflict on the Peninsula, citing significant military buildup on the North Korean side of the 38th parallel one week before the war broke out. However, the assessment was considered too vague and was later categorized as an intelligence failure. According to a public CIA report, the agency was only a small organization in 1950 with limited collection and analysis capabilities. By late January of 1950, there were only 5,000 employees worldwide, and there were only three operations officers in South Korea before the June 1950 invasion.¹

From 1950 to 1970, the USIC primarily focused on North Korea's military capabilities, including tactical movements and conventional weapons systems to help guard against a restarting of the Korean War. During this period, the CIA also helped South Korea establish its first civilian intelligence organization to fight against North Korea's attempts to unify the Peninsula under communism.

From 1970 to 1990, the USIC's intelligence collection against North Korea shifted to prioritize leadership plans and intentions. It became increasingly clear that North Korea was making progress in developing strategic weapons, such as missiles and nuclear devices, and that North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung, was grooming his son, Kim Jong Il, to be the next leader of the country.

After the United States withdrew tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991, and Pyongyang and Seoul signed the [Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula](#), a path for dialogue emerged between the United States and North Korea. From 1994 to 2003, there were three sets of major engagements between the U.S. and North Korea: the Agreed Framework (1994 - 2003), Missile Talks (1996 - 2000), and the Perry Process (1999 - 2000).

1 The Korean War Controversy: An Intelligence Success or Failure?: <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/featured-story-archive/2015-featured-story-archive/korean-war-intelligence-success-or-failure.html>

During the Agreed Framework negotiations, the USIC supported the negotiations team from the beginning with technical expertise and analytic assessments. The U.S. aimed to freeze North Korea's nuclear program, and press Pyongyang to stay on as a member of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in exchange for two light water reactors. To support these negotiations, the USIC was required to provide credible, technical, and verifiable data. Ultimately, the Agreed Framework failed when the USIC discovered North Korea's covert uranium enrichment program, and Pyongyang decided to withdraw from the NPT.

The Missile Talks, a byproduct of the Agreed Framework, consisted of six rounds of talks. The U.S. sought to curb North Korea's ballistic missile exports and limit further testing; in return, North Korea demanded that the United States compensate Pyongyang for lost revenues from missile exports. The USIC actively supported the negotiations with subject matter expertise and analysis of potential verification measures. There was no formal agreement, but the North honored a self-imposed moratorium on long-range missile testing and space vehicle launches until 2006.

Shortly after the North launched a long-range ballistic missile over Japan in 1998, the U.S. Government asked former Secretary of Defense William Perry to review the state of North Korea policy and reassess objectives outlined in the Agreed Framework. Frequently referred to as the Perry Process, the USIC helped prepare Dr. Perry and his team with analysis and technical expertise, once again, while he engaged North and South Korea, China, and Japan. After several rounds of negotiations, Perry produced a report that included several recommendations, which the United States and North Korea both accepted. The Perry Process stalled, however, during the change in U.S. administration from President Bill Clinton to President George W. Bush.^{2 3}

From 2003 to 2008, China convened several rounds of the Six-Party Talks in Beijing. From the outset, the USIC collaborated very closely with the policy community in planning meetings and providing objective intelligence analysis in a policy-centric setting. The USIC's role in supporting negotiations significantly expanded during this period. For example, a former high-level CIA officer became the Special Envoy for the Six-Party Talks in 2003 and effectively coordinated between the USIC and the U.S. policy community. The biggest challenge for the USIC to support these types of multilateral meetings was to provide subject-matter expertise, not only on nuclear and missile issues, but also on the geopolitical dynamics of the Six-Party participants. In the end, the Six-Party Talks stalled over the dispute regarding verification, which was not included in the October 2007 agreement. From the USIC perspective, the Six-Party Talks provided an opportunity to interact

2 Factsheet: History of U.S. Negotiations with North Korea, 1992-Present: <https://ploughshares.org/issues-analysis/article/factsheet-history-us-negotiations-north-korea-1992-present>

3 Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>

with North Koreans over a long period of time and learn what makes them tick, their negotiation techniques, and how their government functions.^{4 5 6}

From 2011 to 2012, the Obama administration resumed denuclearization talks with North Korea and initially announced an agreement called the “Leap Day Deal,” in which North Korea agreed to a moratorium on its long-range missile and nuclear tests in exchange for 240,000 metric tons of food aid. Before Kim Jong Il died in 2011, it appeared that North Korea was in a more desperate economic situation as Kim traveled to China twice to ask for assistance despite his fragile health. Again, the USIC provided its support to the policy community with technical expertise and analysis. It was great timing for the CIA’s newly created Counterproliferation Center to contribute to the process.⁷ The Leap Day Deal was called off in the end over the dispute regarding North Korea’s insistence it had the right to launch a satellite; the U.S. opposed this because such a launch relied on sanctioned long-range ballistic missile technology.^{8, 9, 10}

From 2012 to 2017, the interaction between the United States and North Korea was minimal. After the Leap Day Deal was called off in 2012, the Obama administration officially adopted the “Strategic Patience” policy and did not engage the North. A core element of this policy was pressuring China to convince North Korea to denuclearize, under the belief that China views North Korea as a national security liability. However, in reality, China sees the United States as a bigger threat and North Korea as a useful buffer. As such, China does not want to take actions against North Korea that could benefit U.S. interests in Asia. While there was a lack of engagement with North Korea during this period, the USIC maintained discreet contacts with Pyongyang. For example, then Director of National Intelligence James Clapper led a small team to Pyongyang to bring American detainees back home in 2014. Such an important visit, especially to a hermit kingdom like North Korea, could

4 Factsheet: History of U.S. Negotiations with North Korea, 1992-Present: <https://ploughshares.org/issues-analysis/article/factsheet-history-us-negotiations-north-korea-1992-present>

5 Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>

6 The Six-Party Talks at a Glance: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/6partytalks>

7 Factsheet: History of U.S. Negotiations with North Korea, 1992-Present: <https://ploughshares.org/issues-analysis/article/factsheet-history-us-negotiations-north-korea-1992-present>

8 Factsheet: History of U.S. Negotiations with North Korea, 1992-Present: <https://ploughshares.org/issues-analysis/article/factsheet-history-us-negotiations-north-korea-1992-present>

9 Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>

10 CIA Launches New Counterproliferation Center: <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-2010/cia-launches-new-counterproliferation-center.html>

not have taken place without multiple working-level meetings and some type of reliable communication channel.^{11, 12, 13}

From 2017 to the present, dealing with North Korea has been a roller coaster ride. Tensions escalated when North Korea started testing intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), and a powerful nuclear device in 2017. It was as though the North was on a fast-paced timeline to master all WMD capabilities, delivery systems, and weapons, by the end of that year. In response, the United States had no choice but to flex its military muscle by deploying military assets to the region and pressing the United Nations to impose severe sanctions against North Korea. In direct response to a presidential initiative to defuse North Korea's long-standing threat, CIA Director Michael Pompeo established the Korea Mission Center in 2017. The mission center, working closely with other USIC members, immediately started contributing to the Maximum Pressure campaign. A cadre of officers with expertise in WMD, internal North Korean issues, and economic sanctions implemented several campaign strategies, and provided strategic and tactical analysis to policymakers. At the same time, the CIA orchestrated the first Director's visit to Pyongyang in 2018, which restarted denuclearization talks and ultimately led to the first U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore.

Some critics say the CIA's role in diplomacy was a departure from its traditional responsibilities. Several factors contributed to the CIA's leading role in initial communications between the United States and North Korea. First, the only North Korean organization that Kim Jong Un trusted to contact the United States was a quasi-intelligence organization that is well known to the CIA. This North Korean department is the same organization that also actively engaged with the CIA's long-time liaison counterpart in South Korea, the National Intelligence Service (NIS). As a result, CIA officers were well prepared to handle complicated North Korean issues with deep regional, language, and WMD expertise. The CIA also had a cadre of officers with North Korea expertise that other parts of the U.S. Government lacked; this is because CIA experts tend to spend years studying one country or topic. Throughout the process, however, the CIA stayed within its boundary of supporting policymakers, helping to reopen negotiations, and defusing threats.¹⁴

11 Factsheet: History of U.S. Negotiations with North Korea, 1992-Present: <https://ploughshares.org/issues-analysis/article/factsheet-history-us-negotiations-north-korea-1992-present>

12 Strategic Patience or Back to Engagement? Obama's Dilemma on North Korea: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43908853?seq=1>

13 How Clapper's Secret Mission to North Korea Came About: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/clappers-secret-mission-north-korea/story?id=26792834>

14 CIA Establishes Korea Mission Center: <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/2017-press-releases-statements/cia-establishes-korea-mission-center.html>

Observations

While directly supporting U.S. negotiation teams over the years, the USIC made some interesting observations that should be incorporated into understanding the unique challenges that occur when facing North Koreans across the table.

1) Communication: North Korean negotiators often emphasize that, after over 70 years of hostilities, the United States and North Korea need to focus on building a warm relationship before Pyongyang can trust Washington enough to give up its nuclear ambitions. The North claimed a good starting point in building rapport is establishing an effective communication channel between the two governments. Despite a stated desire for clarity, the North's communication style is often contradictory. Pyongyang also communicates at a slower pace, such as via written correspondence, even when situations call for urgent, rapid exchange of opinions. North Korean officials also focus exclusively on the message's content and often forget that how they deliver the message is important.

Additionally, Pyongyang seems to enjoy using heavily nuanced language and a mixed bag of metaphors, which leads to confusion and requires extra time for the U.S. side to understand fully. For example, North Korean negotiators at one point demanded several times that the United States should help improve the livelihood of the North Korean people. It took a while for their U.S. counterparts to understand that they were implying that the U.S. Government should ease sanctions and allow the resumption of inter-Korean tourism and businesses at the Kaesong industrial complex because of the money-generating opportunities. Another recent example came from Kim Yo Jong, the sister of Kim Jong Un, in July 2020. She mentioned that she would like to own a DVD to see a recent celebration of America's Independence Day. This nuanced statement came during a deadlock in communications between the two governments, and the comment could be interpreted multiple ways from requesting sanctions relief to wanting more bilateral exchanges.

North Korea's opaque communication style comes from its prideful culture and history of isolation from foreign countries. Despite North Korean officials wanting to reopen communication with the United States, they would never be the one to propose it formally due to their culture, which prefers a more subtle approach. The USIC's expertise is helpful in recognizing and understanding these cultural nuances, which enables it to assist the U.S. Government in deciphering North Korea's bottom line. Additionally, the lack of clear communications between the two countries have allowed third parties, including foreign governments and individuals, to attempt to insert themselves into the conversation as a broker. A plausible way to minimize these communication problems and to avoid unwanted involvements is to have a quasi-government presence in both capitals if the political climate permits. This would provide more direct access to facilitate improved mutual understanding

of each side's nuances. This would, in turn, help to make space for clearer communication in order to avoid misunderstanding.¹⁵

2) Bad Cop vs. Good Cop: North Korea infamously uses a bad cop - good cop negotiation tactic with the United States to gain favorable results. Traditionally, North Korean negotiators are Foreign Ministry officials who will take on the good cop role. During negotiation discussions with the United States, the “good cops” will use North Korean hardliners, typically the military leadership, as the “bad cops” who are portrayed as anti-U.S. Government. This tactic of bad cop vs. good cop during major negotiations is well known to the United States and is never successful. However, it seems that Pyongyang cannot resist the urge to continue this practice time and time again. The persistence of this tactic against the United States either indicates that Kim Jong Un is not fully in charge, or the North is not serious about resolving long-standing bilateral differences.

3) Pyongyang's Limited Knowledge of the United States: Foreigners dealing with North Koreans, including Americans, have walked away with the impression that North Koreans seem to be well aware of current events and systems in the United States. Considering how closed off North Korean society is and how it lacks access to outside information, North Korean officials who possess some knowledge of the United States would be impressive to foreigners. However, when dealing with them further, it becomes apparent that their knowledge of the United States is limited. For example, North Korean leaders were not rushing to advance negotiations in 2019 and were instead waiting for the United States, because Pyongyang believed that the Trump administration was under pressure to showcase a foreign policy victory before the election season. North Korea's misconception comes from its belief that U.S. foreign policy is more important than domestic politics. In reality, the U.S. public cares more about domestic concerns such as economic policies rather than foreign relations.

Another example is Kim Jong Un's behavior at the Hanoi summit and how the North Koreans continued to conduct brinkmanship diplomacy despite clear communications from U.S. policymakers on their intentions beforehand. Prior to Kim Jong Un's arrival in Hanoi, the North Korean advance team was there to negotiate with U.S. counterparts. At these working-level meetings, the U.S. team explained its bottom line several times. However, Kim never demonstrated his awareness of what the U.S. team conveyed during his meetings later with President Trump. Either Kim and his team entirely misread U.S. intentions or decided to continue brinkmanship tactics despite clearly stated U.S. objectives. Trying to understand the United States by reading strictly open-source materials and watching U.S. news would limit North Korea's ability to accurately assess the bigger picture. Making things worse, North Korea often obtains news about the United States via South Korean media reports that are full of South Korea's interpretations and biases. South Korean media

15 Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron>

coverage of the U.S. heavily emphasizes and focuses on U.S.-South Korean and U.S.-North Korean issues, which oversells the importance of the two Koreas to the U.S. Government.¹⁶

4) Differences in perceptions: When dealing with North Korean officials, it becomes clear that the United States and North Korea do not value the same priorities. It is noticeable that North Koreans attach great importance to *protocol* and a theatrical level of ceremonies, whereas U.S. officials focus on *content*. North Korea provided red carpet treatment for U.S. officials during their visit to Pyongyang, and they expected that the United States would do the same. In fact, sometimes North Korean officials measure a visit's success on how well they are treated by the U.S. Government as they see themselves being shoulder-to-shoulder with a great superpower. However, U.S. officials do not place as much weight on ceremonies as their North Korean counterparts; the United States is simply more focused on progress made in negotiations.

Another example of a misperception between the two countries is how the United States believes that painting a picture of how they can help bring a “brighter future” to North Korea would convince them to give up their nuclear ambitions. However, North Korean leaders are more focused on immediate returns and believe their future is in their own hands. Leading up to the 2018 Singapore summit, the U.S. government prepared a short video of what an open, modern North Korea could look like. The video was shown to Kim Jong Un and his leadership team during the summit. However, Kim and his team did not have much feedback on the video as they appeared to be uncomfortable with the idea that the U.S. was trying to dictate North Korea's future. This video was a good example of how there is a lack of understanding in the U.S. Government of North Korean leadership's overall Juche philosophy of self-sufficiency.¹⁷

5) What once worked does not always work in other cases: When discussing the topic of North Korea's denuclearization in the United States, people often reference the Libya model. However, Khaddaffi's fate of losing his power and life after giving up his nuclear program to the United States is exactly the reason why North Korea expedited perfecting its own nuclear weapons program. In order to move to a more meaningful negotiation with North Korea, the United States should quickly drop non-starters, like the Libya model, when dealing with North Korea.

There has been a long history of negotiating with Pyongyang on denuclearization, and these negotiations have been in different formats from bilateral talks, trilateral talks, four party talks, to six party talks. While certain aspects of these past negotiations have worked, there have been many lessons learned through these failed engagements. These past lessons provide a useful reference,

16 How the Trump-Kim Summit Failed: Big Threats, Big Egos, Bad Bets: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/world/asia/trump-kim-jong-un-summit.html>

17 Will He Shake the Hand of Peace? Here's the Video President Trump Showed to Kim Jong Un: <https://time.com/5309671/donald-trump-video-kim-jong-un/>

but it should not heavily influence how future negotiations proceed. North Korea today is not like North Korea in the 1990s and 2000s. Geopolitics have become more sensitive as the dynamics of Beijing, Pyongyang, Seoul, and Tokyo are more complicated than ever.

Furthermore, Pyongyang has proven that it has the ability to produce and test ICBMs and nuclear weapons, threatening its neighbors and even U.S. territories. Although there is still a strong debate as to whether the young leader Kim Jong Un would truly denuclearize, it appears that he has the desire to improve North Korea's relationship with the United States. He seems to believe that stable relations with the United States is the only way to lead his country into prosperity and to enhance regime security at the same time. Therefore, instead of looking for an answer from the past, Washington and Pyongyang need to build a creative solution that reflects the current leaderships' goals.¹⁸

Challenges to the USIC

Analysts and experts in the CIA and the IC have been instrumental in supporting recent U.S. administrations, educating policymakers on various topics related to North Korea since 2017. Their expert insights and assessments were particularly sought after during the Trump administration because so many of the senior leaders were new to dealing with North Korea. However, a new phenomenon quickly emerged after these senior U.S. leaders met several times with the highest levels of the North Korean Government. These U.S. senior leaders started to develop their own opinions on critical policy issues and about their North Korean counterparts. In this setting where high-level U.S. consumers of USIC analysis were directly interacting with their North Korea peers, a core challenge for the USIC was staying relevant and insightful. It was important for senior U.S. leadership to realize that familiarity with and access to high-level North Korea officials were no substitute for the USIC's deep subject matter expertise.

18 How the 'Libya Model' Became a Sticking Point in North Korea Nuclear Talks: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/16/world/asia/north-korea-libya-model.html>

Conclusion

Negotiations with Pyongyang has consistently proved to be time consuming and extremely challenging for the U.S. Government over the years. Supporting such efforts have been equally intense for the USIC during this period. However, these engagements also provided unique access into this closed-off country and opportunities to clarify intentions. Although both the United States and North Korea often talked over each other, more direct engagements have led to improvements in relations over time. This is due to additional contacts yielding more opportunities to assess the North, which helps the USIC produce better assessments for its senior-level policy customers.

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Sung Hyun “Andrew” Kim is a non-resident Fellow with the Korea Project at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs.

Mr. Kim retired in November 2018 as a Senior Intelligence Officer from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) after 28 years of service. His last position was Assistant Director of CIA for the Korea Mission Center. He established the Korea Mission Center in April 2017 in direct response to a Presidential initiative to defuse North Korea’s longstanding threat to global security. He also managed and guided CIA analysts who have unique and extensive expertise on Korea to provide strategic and tactical analytic products for a range of policymakers.

He successfully negotiated the foundation for the U.S.-North Korea Summit in Singapore in June 2018—a diplomatic initiative aimed at resolving seven decades of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Mr. Kim also held the Associate Deputy Director of CIA for Operations/Technology position. In this capacity, he led and orchestrated all efforts to update their operational technology and incorporated state-of-the-art doctrine into CIA training curricula.

Mr. Kim, who served as the Chief of CIA Station in three major East Asian cities, managed the collection, analysis, production, and distribution of information that directly affected national security. In recognition of his many contributions, CIA honored Mr. Kim with the Director’s Award (2018), Presidential Rank Award (2012), and the Donovan Award (1990). He speaks fluent Korean, Japanese, and Mandarin Chinese.



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