

# Transcript of Episode 15, “Technology, Diplomacy, and the North Korean Nuclear Crisis.”

[Note: This is a rough transcript of the audio recording, based on digital transcription and human review.]

[00:00:00] One, two, three go.

**Morgan Kaplan:** [00:00:18] Hello, and welcome to *International Security* “Off the Page.” On today's episode, we are talking about the politics of technology and the North Korean nuclear crisis, as well as how lessons from the 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea can be applied to non-proliferation diplomacy today.

I'm Morgan Kaplan, the executive editor of *International Security*. And we'll be speaking with Christopher Lawrence, the author of a recent *IS* article, “Normalization by Other Means: Technological Infrastructure and Political Commitment in the North Korean Nuclear Crisis.” And a little later, we'll go off the page with Ankit Panda, who is the Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for [00:01:00] International Peace.

**Benn Craig:** [00:01:06] [Belfercenter.org/offthepage](http://Belfercenter.org/offthepage) is where you can find past episodes as well as supplemental reading materials. It is also where you can subscribe to “Off the Page” on your favorite [00:01:16] podcast platform.

**Morgan:** Christopher Lawrence is an Assistant Professor of Science, Technology, and International Affairs at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

Joining us now we have Christopher Lawrence, who's written a fantastic article for us in *International Security* called, “Normalization by Other Means: Technological Infrastructure and Political Commitment in the North Korean Nuclear Crisis.” Chris, welcome to the show.

**Christopher Lawrence:** Glad to be here.

**Morgan:** So tell us a little bit about this article [00:01:46] you've written.

**Christopher:** Yeah. So the article analyzes the 1994 Agreed Framework between United States and North Korea. And in particular, I focus on the civilian reactor project that was at the heart of that Agreed Framework. So many listeners will know that the [00:02:00] Agreed Framework was a non-proliferation agreement that called for North Korea to dismantle its plutonium reactors in exchange for civilian light water reactors from the West.

And this arrangement helped resolve that first North Korean nuclear crisis. And some people even believe that it helped prevent a second Korean War in the early nineties. So it's really one of the principle episodes of U.S. engagement in North Korea. Now in the article, I argue that the nonproliferation community today has fundamentally misunderstood the role that the light water reactor project played to help convince the regime to roll back its nuclear weapons program. So today we often think of the light water reactor project is just another

carrot that was intended to bribe the regime into renouncing nuclear weapons. But the real function of the light water reactor was that it offered a way to change North Korea's political relationships with the outside world and potentially reduce their perceived need to build nuclear weapons.

And I showed in the article how this re-interpretation of the Agreed Framework leads to a different appraisal of both the successes and failures of past engagement with North Korea. And it may contain the seeds of a fundamentally different and more [00:03:00] promising approach to nonproliferation diplomacy than the common carrots and sticks formulation.

**Morgan:** [00:03:04] So Chris, why the obsession with light water reactors, right? Like what are the alternatives to light water reactors, and why was it so important for North Korea to have this particular technology as part of the agreement?

**Christopher:** [00:03:17] First, I should point out that there are really two parts of the Agreed Framework.

So the first part was that reactor trade that I was talking about. The second part was that sort of envisioned political future in which the U.S. and North Korea would have a normalized political relationship and both sides would commit to a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula. And it was really that changed political relationship that seems to have been most important to the North Koreans. But the problem was that there was no way to credibly implement that political change on paper, especially since North Korea's real bargaining chip was the nuclear weapons capability and the regime really had no reason to expect the us to follow through on any written commitment to normalize once the North had given up its only bargaining chip.

On the other hand, if you embark on some kind of massive infrastructure project [00:04:00] in North Korea, like a light water reactor, then suddenly you have much more than a written commitment. You're essentially building the physical embodiment of that normalized political relationship.

And then both sides can kind of see that political change unfold before their eyes. So rather than kind of wondering what the other side's true intentions are, they can kind of observe those political changes on the ground in North Korea.

**Morgan:** [00:04:20] But why the light water reactor specifically, right? What is it about the technology?

And that's something that's really interesting about your argument, is that the technology has politics and the politics is about technology. So what is it about the technology of the light water reactors that's so important here, who to establish this kind of a new political future?

**Christopher:** [00:04:36] Right. So you've touched on what is commonly seen as the big mystery of, of the Agreed Framework.

So why would North Korea want light water reactors when everybody understood that fossil fuel power plants would have been a much better solution to their energy challenges? And even the North Koreans agreed that the regime would not have been able to operate those reactors on their own without technical assistance from the West.

But this mystery really subsides when [00:05:00] you start to analyze the unique technical attributes of light water reactors and compare those to that alternative of fossil fuel power plants. So the light water reactor fuel cycle is one of the most globalized technologies in existence. It inevitably brings reactor operating countries into these international networks of technical collaboration.

So things like fuel supply, in core reactor fuel management, safety and liability, and due to the long lives of these reactors and the kind of technological inertia associated with them, the political relationships that attend these forms of collaboration tend to be a bit more sticky than those associated with other forms of energy generation technologies.

And I argue that actors on all sides of the North Korean nuclear crisis at one time or another, have sought to utilize light water reactors in this way. As a way to change North Korea's international relationships and then hopefully set the stage for denuclearization.

**Morgan:** [00:05:48] I mean, this is a super interesting argument and what's kind of fascinating about it is, as most people who study North Korea know, it's extremely difficult to understand the intentions of North Korean officials.

So can you tell us a little [00:06:00] bit more about the kind of evidence you were working with, how you came to have this understanding of the Agreed Framework?

**Christopher:** [00:06:06] Well, the first part of my analysis develops a technical understanding of what it would have physically taken to build and operate large Western reactors North of the DMZ and places those challenges into this diplomatic context of the nuclear crisis. But then, I utilize two document sets available from the National Security Archive that give a lot of insight into how the U.S. negotiators were thinking. And it also gives a lot of indirect insight to what North Korea's thinking was all about.

So what were their red lines? What were the concerns that they expressed during the negotiations? I also interviewed several U.S. diplomats and officials who were working on the issue at the time and having to analyze, you know, just what North Korea's nuclear decision-making looks like. So there's kind of an array of different types of evidence that I'm bringing to the table.

**Morgan:** [00:06:52] For listeners who aren't deeply familiar with the U.S. negotiations with North Korea, what is the conventional wisdom on why the agreement broke [00:07:00] down? And how does your story challenge this conventional wisdom?

**Christopher:** [00:07:04] Yeah. So the article challenges, conventional wisdom in two important ways. So first, the Agreed Framework is commonly dismissed as a complete failure and people point to North Korea's cheating with its secret enrichment program as part of why it failed.

And indeed that's part of the story. And today analysts even point to the Agreed Framework, that reason as an example of what not to do when engaging North Korea or Iran. But the reality is that the Agreed Framework was working. The light water reactor project, when it got off the ground, it also opened up a path to resolve other issues like the missile program.

So not only did the Agreed Framework physically rollback North Korea's nuclear capabilities, and it was more effective than any other U.S. policy to date in doing that, it also appears to have influenced the regime's long term nuclear decision-making. And those in a nutshell are the basic goals of non-proliferation diplomacy.

The second way I challenged conventional wisdom is more fundamental. If you listen to debates today about how to engage North Korea or Iran, those debates are almost always [00:08:00] centered around how to get the right balance of carrots and sticks and how to maximize their effectiveness, but it turns out that some of the most common dimensions of diplomacy don't really fit along that one dimensional axis.

It's very hard to talk about changing a political relationship in a language of carrots and sticks. It's also hard to express credible commitment in the language of carrots and sticks. So this metaphor, which has been at the heart of a nonproliferation discourse for many years, essentially causes the main challenges and potential solutions to non-proliferation crises to sort of disappear from our view.

And I think that that blind spot is why we have systematically misunderstood the Agreed Framework, as well as other aspects of nonproliferation history. And it may be part of why after several decades of engaging North Korea and Iran, we're still struggling with these same crises today.

**Morgan:** [00:08:41] So what's the big policy takeaway from your findings?

**Christopher:** [00:08:43] The basic takeaway of the Agreed Framework experience is pretty straightforward. North Korea's nuclear behavior has been most responsive to U.S. moves that spoke credibly about the political future, has been relatively immune to things like sanctions, transient rewards, written promises. And that suggests that non-proliferation [00:09:00] diplomacy really isn't about rewarding or punishing countries like North Korea and Iran for past behaviors.

Rather, the real challenge is to build the credibility of a political future that is conducive to our non-proliferation goals. And one way to do that is to build a physical U.S. stake in that political future. Now, does that mean we need to build light water reactors in North Korea? Well, I'm not really sure. I think that ship has probably sailed, but there may be other opportunities that could be staring us in the face.

So for instance, South Korea's Moon Jae-In administration has proposed a series of infrastructure projects in North Korea. Uh, so things like real infrastructure, shared grid infrastructure, things that just like the light water reactor could fundamentally change North Korea's international relationships.

And I think that the Biden administration should take a serious look at some of those opportunities if it wants to credibly engage North Korea. For the Iran case, obviously one of the biggest challenges is to rebuild U.S. credibility, and that's not going to happen with the stroke of a pen. So, now some analysts are starting to talk about how the Biden administration should go beyond the nuclear issue and start to build a different relationship with Iran, but they rarely talk about what that political [00:10:00] change would look like physically or how our reliance on sanctions may be blocking some of the technological steps that could improve the outlook for U.S.-Iran engagement going forward.

**Morgan:** [00:10:09] Chris, I only have one more question for you and that is, are you ready?

**Christopher:** [00:10:14] Ready for what?

**Morgan:** To go off the page.

**Christopher:** I was born ready.

**Music:** [00:10:23]

**Benn:** [00:10:24] If you enjoy listening to Off the Page, you'll enjoy reading our quarterly journal *International Security*, which is edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT press. To learn more about the journal, please check out [Belfercenter.org/is](https://www.belfercenter.org/is).

**Morgan:** [00:10:38] Ankit Panda is the Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He is also editor-at-large at the Diplomat and a contributing editor at War on the Rocks. Joining us now we have Ankit Panda. Ankit, welcome to the show.

**Ankit Panda:** [00:10:57] Thanks for having me, pleasure to be here.

**Morgan:** [00:10:58] So we like to [00:11:00] start off, by asking your general impression of Chris's manuscript and, you know, based on your own knowledge and experience with these issues on North Korea, what were your kind of thoughts on the analysis?

**Ankit:** [00:11:09] Absolutely. So, you know, the first thing I'll say is that the Agreed Framework has been one of the most litigated arrangements that we've had with the North Koreans among, you know, the policy community that works on these issues.

So normally when I come across a new article on the Agreed Framework, I start out from a skeptical premise, you know, is there anything new to be said at this point? And you know, I'm very pleased to say that I do think that Chris's article does make an important contribution to our understanding of that agreement.

Particularly pulling out the technological half dependencies that made the specific idea of a light water reactor project appealing to the North Koreans in the context of the broader goal that was set out in the agreement of working towards a normalized U.S.-North Korea relationship. And I think that's a really important point of revisiting what happened in the mid to late 1990s, all the way until really the collapse of the agreement in October 2002.

[00:12:00] We sort of reminisce on this period through this lens of carrots and sticks, which Chris reflects on in his piece quite well.

And I do find the argument to the alternative here, quite convincing in many ways. You know, the only other thing that I would add is that the 1990s were in many ways, I think a period of serious flux within North Korea, not least because of Kim Il-sung's untimely passing right before the conclusion of the Agreed Framework in the summer of 1994.

And that sort of set us on a path where the North Koreans, then under Kim Jong-Il, through the 1990s were of course, while they were engaging with the United States on KEDO and later the Perry Process in the late nineties on the Missile Moratorium, were engaging at the same time with, you know, actors like A.Q. Khan.

And this was around the time in which they were amassing some of the materials that eventually led to the covert hedge, so to speak, in the form of a uranium enrichment program and incorporating that and sort of, you know, understanding how the North Korean interest in a light water reactor project and the broader project of [00:13:00] normalization relates to that effort.

I think unfortunately, there's a lot of gaps in our knowledge there simply of what exactly A.Q. Khan was up to with the North Koreans in the 1990s. But, you know, in terms of follow on work from here, I think it would be interesting to think about how exactly the eventual uranium enrichment program that appeared in North Korea intersected with North Korean understandings of the Agreed Framework and the KEDO project.

**Morgan:** [00:13:21] One thing that was interesting, it comes out in Chris's article is precisely how the unique technological aspects of the light water reactor deal was part of this process by which North Korea was trying to normalize relations with the United States. And it's, it's a heavily, kind of technical discussion.

Do you think that at the time, most diplomats, at least on the U.S. side were aware of the political meaning of these technological aspects? Or do you think that was something that may have actually not been even fully understood by U.S. diplomats themselves?

**Ankit:** [00:13:50] Yeah. I think the answer, you know, as it often is it's somewhere in the middle.

I think certainly folks that were involved in negotiating the Agreed Framework understood what the promise [00:14:00] of a light water reactor meant to North Korea, primarily in terms of power generation, right? The North Koreans had two unfinished reactors that never came online, Taechon and another at Yongbyon 200 megawatt electric and 50 megawatt electric capacities, respectively.

So the promise of the light water reactor project was significant. And of course, this is all taking place in the geopolitical context of the 1990s when Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il are learning what it means to run North Korea without the patronage that they had traditionally enjoyed from the Soviet Union.

In the United States, of course, and I think again, here Chris's article does a very good job; the debates that happened in Congress, in particular, on this agreement, really, I think adopted the carrots and sticks approach where the justification that was being provided to American lawmakers who held the purse strings was that this was the way to keep the North Koreans from the bomb.

You actually see some parallels in many ways to the debates that the Obama administration, and now, unfortunately, the Biden administration have to sort of revisit when it comes to the JCPOA with Iran in many ways. And that's sort of the way in which that [00:15:00] agreement was solved. The technical details weren't necessarily a part of the defense for the agreement politically in the United States.

At least that's my understanding, but certainly I think folks that were, were involved in negotiating the agreement and involved in KEDO itself understood the technical stickiness of a light water reactor and what that would mean for long-term U.S.-North Korea cooperation and coordination.

**Christopher:** [00:15:19] Yeah. Yeah. That's really consistent actually with my analysis when you said the answer is sort of in between, and there's some caveats that I just wanted to be clear about. So one caveat is that the U.S. negotiators that I spoke with were actually pretty clear that they weren't seeking normalization with North Korea for its own sake. They were indeed just trying to get rid of North Korea's nuclear program, but dating back all the way, even to the first Bush administration, there was a perception that normalization and denuclearization were somehow intertwined.

Another thing that I gleaned from my conversations with U.S. diplomats, is they often do, seem to have a quite sophisticated understanding of the nuclear technology. I think they understood for instance, [00:16:00] as did the North Koreans, that they wouldn't really have been able to operate light water reactors on their own without Western assistance.

One thing that I think, you know, that sort of complicates the story a little bit is that none of the folks that I interviewed, there was no sort of mastermind behind the Agreed Framework. In other words, nobody that I interviewed would have been able to necessarily articulate all of these technical attributes of light water reactors, the way I do in the article.

But what I think typically happens is that when negotiators enter negotiation, they kind of have a perception of the unique opportunities and challenges of that contextual or that structural situation that they're in. And some of those were introduced by the reactors. And I think that at various times, actors on all sides of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis, kind of perceived and pursued some of the opportunities that were offered by light water reactors.

Another thing that I find when U.S. diplomats are describing their challenges and their [00:17:00] approach to negotiations, they'll describe things different for an American audience than they will amongst themselves. And part of the reason for that is that they have to navigate the domestic politics in the United States as well.

So you'll see, I think, and if you look at the transcript of those hearings, you'll see that they sort of lapse into a carrot and stick framework even if I think their policy was a divergence

from the carrot and stick paradigm. And part of that might be maybe a subconscious attempt to try to engage with the U.S. audience.

**Ankit:** [00:17:30] Yeah. And you know, on the North Korean side too, it's, it's pretty apparent that the way in which the North Koreans were presenting this to the outside world was very much not in the carrot and sticks frame. Right, I mean, obviously if you're in the North Korean regime, you don't want to say that you're basically, you know, you're having your nuclear program bought off by the provision of a light water reactor.

So, you know, I mean, just in preparing for this discussion today, I sort of went back and spent a lot of time reading North Korean primary documents, but, you know, I went all the way back to 1998, you know, a few years into the Agreed Framework and it's interesting to see the North Korean Foreign Ministry.

And this is already, when you've had [00:18:00] a few bumps in the road with things like heavy fuel oil deliveries being delayed, the North Koreans kind of seeing a few bumps in the road. And so, you know, they describe the Agreed Framework as being a joint document for the improvement of bilateral ties. It is a landmark that aims to put a period to the deep rooted, hostile relations of scores of years, and to move towards the normalization of ties.

So it's very clear that I think the North Koreans understood that the complexity, the stickiness of the light water project would bind the United States in many ways. Right, and they were, of course, you know, we have to also recall that a lot of this came out of the war scare of the mid-1990s as well.

And engaging in a project like this also buys the North Koreans time at a very difficult time internally for themselves. They're undergoing a leadership transition, the internal economy is doing very badly after the collapse of the Soviet union. And also in this context, I think it makes sense for them to talk about the Agreed Framework in the way that they do.

**Morgan:** [00:18:50] One question I have for both of you, thinking about the kind of counterfactual is, do you think the Agreed Framework would have succeeded in creating this new [00:19:00] political reality of normalization between the United States, the international community, and North Korea had the deal not been terminated by the Bush administration?

I mean, in some ways it's kind of saying, you know, if everything kind of went according to plan, would the Agreed Framework have worked?

**Ankit:** [00:19:15] I think it was John Bolton who described the revelations of late 2002, when the Bush administration confronted the North Koreans about their amassing of a covert enrichment program, that, you know, he described it as the hammer that he'd been looking for to shatter the Agreed Framework.

These were people that from the beginning, came into office with a distaste for diplomacy with North Korea. And when they had the opportunity to confront the North Koreans about their interest in potentially pursuing an Enrichment Program, they didn't actually seek to create any sort of off-ramp. It was effectively presented as the North Koreans behaving in a way that violated at least the spirit of the Agreed Framework.



And ultimately they walked away from the deal. Right, so the counterfactual that I spend a lot of time wondering about is what would [00:20:00] have happened if we'd sort of addressed that crisis with the North Koreans in late 2002 and created an off-ramp, kept KEDO alive, kept the Agreed Framework on life support for some time, while we worked to seek compliance from the North Koreans, with what we deemed to be problematic with the Enrichment Program.

It's very difficult to say what would have happened in the aftermath. You know, I do think for instance, the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 was a huge wake up call for Kim Jong-il.

He disappeared from public for a period of months. And when he returned, we heard from the North Koreans that they planned to test a nuclear device soon, they began talking much more about the 'physical aspects of nuclear deterrence.' So that in itself is an inflection point. So it's not just the collapse that the Agreed Framework is the point that I'm trying to make here, you know, it's other factors related to the Bush administration's foreign policy in the first term that also weighed on North Korean decision-making during this time.

**Christopher:** [00:20:53] Yeah, I think that, again, my analysis is pretty similar. I think that any diplomatic outcome is always [00:21:00] multifactorial. So I think, just as Ankit was suggesting, one of the factors contributing to the collapse of the Agreed Framework was that several people in the Bush administration entered office with the intent to dismantle it.

But I also think that North Korea's behavior contributed to what made that possible. They were indeed pursuing a secret Enrichment Program that violated the spirit of the Agreed Framework. What my article tries to do is to identify some of the factors early on that may have set the stage for that.

And some of those factors may have been less obvious if we're thinking in terms of carrots and sticks. So for example, shortly after the Agreed Framework was signed, Congress mandated that no U.S. funding could go to the light water reactors. And you know, if this is about rewarding North Korea, then who cares? Why does North Korea care who pays for it?

But if this is a costly signal to signal U.S. commitment, well, then if the U.S. isn't willing to pay any of the bills, then that sort of signals that they're not very committed. So I think that was one of the things that contributed early on and also the U.S. Congress [00:22:00] mandated a sort of limit to any U.S. funding going to KEDO altogether of \$30 million per year.

So within a year of its existence, KEDO was operating on deficit financing and the North Koreans pointed this out. And the sort of height of, if you look at when North Korea obtained its first centrifuge parts, in around 1997, again Ankit's right, that that's sort of murky. We can't really know exactly the details of this, but it appears they obtained their centrifuge parts for a pilot enrichment program around 1997.

That's really at the height of KEDO, insolvency, KEDO was expected to go under the following year and they're in both official settings and track two settings, they're sort of hinting at this, that if the U.S. doesn't sort of get the light water reactor project off the ground, then they're going to have to go a different path.

And they even sort of implied that they had something in the background that would give them another nuclear weapons option. So I think these things kind of contributed to having KEDO sort of hanging by a thread throughout its life. And [00:23:00] so that is part of what allowed people in the Bush administration to finally put the nail in the coffin.

**Morgan:** [00:23:05] Right, and so regardless of counterfactual, we know where we are today. The North Koreans have a number of nuclear weapons. And we're clearly at a point now, or at least I think we're clearly at a point now where the idea of denuclearizing North Korea isn't feasible, right? This is about establishing a relationship with a country that has nuclear weapons and is likely not going to give them up. When thinking about Chris's article, this idea of frameworks designed to normalize relations and perhaps to use technology as a way to help normalize relations between the United States North Korea – is something like that still possible? Is the new administration thinking along these lines? What are possible worlds that can exist now for what any sort of agreement with North Korea would look like?

**Ankit:** [00:23:48] Yeah. So, you know, possible yes. Feasible, less so, at least, at least from where I'm sitting. I mean, look, I think, I think one of the most fascinating things that North Korean diplomats have told American counterparts in track [00:24:00] 1.5 settings in recent years in the Kim Jong-un era specifically is basically that they want the India deal, right?

They still want to normalize relations with the United States and they know that the United States, when it deems a country to be useful or friendly to its geopolitical interests in any part of the world, can set aside its non-proliferation concerns. And to this, you know, Americans point out to the North Koreans, that there's a lot of things that made the relationship with India, more appealing than normalization with North Korea would be, especially a nuclear armed North Korea in Northeast Asia, as we still try to practice extended deterrence and reassure South Korea and Japan.

But that's what the North Koreans are pitching these days. Right? They're very careful never to suggest that their nuclear arsenal is something that can be bargained away. We've seen explicit language, saying that inducements of any sort or economic or other, even certain kinds of security guarantees are no longer sufficient to put their nuclear program back in the bottle.

And then for the American side, of course, you know what I think makes all of this difficult and the idea of normalization more generally difficult, even though we [00:25:00] can read the aspirational goals of the Singapore Declaration from 2018 as setting us on a path to normalization, is how do you, how do you do this?

So the nuclear armed North Korea, when you're more broadly trying to, you know, not create any perverse incentives for other would be proliferants and preserve the nonproliferation regime at large, you could only do that with the North Korea that would return to the NPT as a non-nuclear weapons state.

So the obstacles I think are tremendous, but the North Koreans, I think still insist that if the United States determined that North Korea could be a useful partner in many ways in

Northeast Asia, and you can come up with a number of scenarios here, the North Koreans are skeptical of their relationship with China in many ways.

And they've always been sort of adept at managing so-called great power competition. Right, they, they played the, the Chinese and the Soviets off each other after the Sino-Soviet split, and even before the Sino-Soviet split. So they may be open to sort of recreating a version of that in the 21st century.

But like I said, I just don't think it's very feasible.

**Christopher:** [00:25:56] I have maybe a slightly different interpretation. [00:26:00] So generally speaking on the question of denuclearization today, I sort of am agnostic on that question. I think we really don't yet know what Kim Jong-un's true long-term intentions are. And I think that the goal of U.S. policy should be to earnestly probe, the prospect of denuclearization while leaving our security and alliances better off, even if that prospect ultimately proves to be impossible.

Now, the second part of that equation, you know, leaving our security and alliances better off, I think Ankit, if I interpreted correctly, has contributed to that second part in a productive way. It seems like he's sometimes trying to prepare the American sort of zeitgeist for the prospect that North Korea would remain a nuclear weapon state indefinitely.

And if you think of the space of possible worlds in which North Korea has nuclear weapons, some of those are considerably more dangerous than others. And I think that U.S. policy doesn't necessarily reflect that and that it should. But the other side of that equation sort of probing the prospect of denuclearization.

I think Ankit wrote [00:27:00] a really great article with Vipin Narang in War on the Rocks a couple of years ago. And there's this passage that I quote in a lot of my talks. So they asked the question, "could any security assurances be sufficiently credible to persuade North Korea or Kim Jong-un to give up nuclear weapons?" And I think that's a rhetorical question. I think their answer is "no." And I think that is a useful way of framing it because it really beautifully captures the kind of commitment problem structure that I talk about if North Korea gives up its only bargaining chip, then how can I expect the U.S. to follow through on a commitment to normalization? Right. But whenever I quote that, I sort of introduce in brackets, the word "written." Could any *written* security, assurances, or any *written* commitments be sufficiently credible to get North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons?

Again, I think the answer is "no," but it opens up the possibility that there are other mechanisms of commitment. And I think that if we look at some of the proposals. You know, I think the ship has sailed on light water reactors, but today, if we look at Moon Jae-in's [00:28:00] new economic map proposals, then I think there might be other opportunities.

So there is this string of infrastructure proposals that the Moon Jae-In administration has made that would fundamentally change North Korean relationships with the outside world. And if those could be somewhat harnessed as a way to kind of build the credibility of this different political future, then it remains an open question whether or not North Korea might choose that over nuclear weapons.

But generally speaking, if we think of U.S. concessions or diplomatic concessions toward North Korea, not as ways to reward North Korea, but as ways to build the credibility of U.S. commitment to that changing political future by building a physical stake in that political future, you know, then we might start to actually probe that question of denuclearization in a more effective way.

**Ankit:** [00:28:46] Thanks a lot for your kind words about that War on the Rocks piece. That was yeah, a few years ago in a very different context in many ways, you know, I actually think we see eye to eye on a lot of this.

I mean, just to point out the North Koreans of course have an experimental light water reactor [00:29:00] under construction at Yongbyon. They've had that under construction for about a decade now. And, you know, I was part of a policy study group when I was at the Federation of American Scientists. And we were trying to sort of think about what might be done with the LWR, because that was a, of course, a sticking point at the Hanoi Summit that the North Koreans were very clear that they wanted to give up the enrichment facilities at Yongbyon, the, a reprocessing facilities, the reactor, a gas graphite reactor, but not, not the experimental light water reactor, because if they continue to see a need for atomic energy in the country, and Kim Jong-U=un in his 2019 New Year's Day address even referenced an ocean of atomic power.

So I would suggest that this remains a useful way in which to think about building sticky and credible commitments with the North Koreans. If not, a light water reactor project, thinking in terms of economic cooperation project, and I think you're absolutely right that the South Koreans under Moon Jae-in have been trying to impress this on the United States, this is sort of their point on pursuing a parallel process of peace building on the Korean [00:30:00] peninsula through economic means to broadly build confidence that can then translate into concessions on the denuclearization front.

**Morgan:** [00:30:07] One very important thing that makes this discussion on how to normalize relations with the North Koreans, very difficult, is of course, because the North Koreans have nuclear weapons and I think some would argue that they already have even a deterrent capacity, but how do the lessons learned from dangers with North Korea apply to other countries? Think, for example, Iran, I mean, this is a hot topic everyone's talking about now in the Biden administration and what they're going to do about either reentering the JCPOA or moving forward with trying to keep the Iranians from transitioning their nuclear program to a weapons program.

**Ankit:** [00:30:43] You know, the biggest lesson for me, at least from my own study of the history of our negotiating luck, or I guess luck and skill with the North Koreans, is over time deals tend to get worse and deals tend to look worse, leverage on the other side tends to go up. That's been, I think, a big part of the story with [00:31:00] North Korea. When we concluded the Agreed Framework, I think the conditions inside North Korea were just uniquely, there was a unique sense of vulnerability within the country.

And again, the end of the Cold War, Kim Il-sung's death, the first transition in the regime. You know, intel analysts in Washington sort of briefing policymakers that the regime might

collapse overnight, of course, that turned out to be a bad bet. But you know, the lesson I think in the contemporary context is if we lose the JCPOA, let's say that happens, I mean, first of all, what will Iran do? I'm not going to speculate there if, whether or not they will make a decision to politically initiate pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability again. But if, and when we do finally then deescalate, whatever crisis comes after losing the JCPOA, the kinds of deals that we'll, we'll be able to get with the Iranians and the kinds of leverage the Iranians will bring to the table won't be in our interest. Ultimately, I think these things tends not to be on our side, especially if our overarching objective is to prevent these horses from leaving the barn, which is, you know, ultimately on the North [00:32:00] Korea question, I'm sort of, of the view these days that it's no longer a non-proliferation question, right? It's, it's more a question of deterrence and disarmament, just like we talk about other nuclear weapons states. But with Iran, if we want to keep it in a non-proliferation problem, that's something to, I think, keep in mind.

**Christopher:** [00:32:16] Yeah, I definitely agree that, you know, we got rid of the Agreed Framework and things got considerably worse. And I think that is a good lesson for thinking about the JCPOA. But the other thing that I think is also a useful lesson is that if we think about what comes after the JCPOA, a lot of critics of the JCPOA say that, well, it just focuses on the nuclear stuff and it doesn't capture these other issues, like use of proxies and their missile program.

And so we need to find some comprehensive deal. I think part of the lesson, if you look at the late nineties, when the light water reactor project was just getting off the ground, the Clinton administration, Secretary of State, Madeline Albright traveled to North Korea and met with Kim Jong-il and there [00:33:00] was a point by point proposal that was technically sound to completely eliminate North Korea's missile program.

And so that's, I think strongly suggests that even though a deal like the Agreed Framework or the JCPOA might be limited to the nuclear issue, if it deals with some of the aspects of the relationship that are of concern to North Korea or Iran, then it can serve as a stepping stone for dealing with these other issues.

**Morgan:** [00:33:24] Great. Well, this has been a fantastic conversation and it's a bit of a tradition on our show that we like to ask our special guests what advice would you give junior folks who are either scholars, practitioners, analysts, as they begin their career, given all your experiences.

**Ankit:** [00:33:40] So I would say, read widely, know your portfolio.

You know, if you're presenting yourself as an expert or you aspire to be an expert, it pays to do the reading. It pays to talk to folks that have been working on the issues that you're interested in before you did, and to maintain a degree of humility. And finally, I think I do find it helps to make connections in the field.

Talk to senior [00:34:00] folks, seek out new mentors. It's really quite helpful. It gives you a sense of the lay of the land. And especially if you're somebody that's looking for institutions

that may be good hosts for the kind of work that you're seeking to do, a really good way to do that is, I think, to really cast a wide net and talk to as many people as you can.

**Morgan:** [00:34:15] Fantastic. Well Ankit, Chris, thank you so much for joining the show today. Thanks a lot.

**Julie:** [00:34:28] Off the Page is a production of *International Security*, a quarterly journal edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT press. Our program is produced and edited by Morgan Kaplan, the executive editor of *International Security*, the associate producer and technical director is Benn Craig, digital communications by me, Julie Balise, production support by Carly Demetre.

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