

Consistent Inconsistency

What one thirty-year-old cable reveals about US-DPRK relations

Ben Forney

(PhD candidate at the Seoul National University)

On August 13, 1991, the US State Department sent a classified diplomatic cable to Tokyo, summarizing the key points of a meeting held between US and South Korean officials the previous week. The topic of the meeting was North Korea's nascent nuclear program. In the cable, the Japanese were informed of the threat this posed to the region and were encouraged to present unified opposition against Pyongyang's increasingly defiant behavior. Thirty years later, it is a testament to the failure of the international community's approach to North Korea that the language used in the cable remains relevant and repeated in current policy discussions.

"Both sides agreed that the development by North Korea of nuclear weapons usable materials posed a **gravely serious threat** to security in North East Asia[...] We agreed that we should exert **maximum efforts diplomatically** to find a solution to this problem[...] The importance of **pressure from the broad international community** was stressed[...] inspections of North Korean nuclear facilities by the IAEA should be devised to **maximize pressure** at each stage." (emphasis added)¹

As even the most casual North Korea watcher will recognize, variations of these phrases have been

¹ "Telegram, State Department to Tokyo, etc., August 13, 1991, Subject: U.S.-ROK Hawaii Meeting on North Korea (Secret)" <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4176666-Document-01-Telegram-State-Department-to-Tokyo>. (See also "Memorandum for Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, Subject: The Next Steps in the North Korea Nuclear Issue, ca. September 1991 Secret/Eyes Only" <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4176667-Document-02-Memorandum-for-Under-Secretary-of> and "Paper, US-ROK Basic Positions, ca. August/September 1991, Secret (two versions: a and b)" <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4176669-Document-03b-Paper-US-ROK-Basic-Positions-ca>)

repeated by American administrations ever since. Policymakers have called the North Korean nuclear weapons program a “grave concern”², while “maximum pressure” remains a catchphrase for security establishment hawks.³ At the same time, Washington continues to pursue unified collaboration with Seoul and Tokyo. Secretary of State Blinken recently emphasized the Biden administration’s intention to engage in “close cooperation and consultation with the Republic of Korea, with Japan and with other key partners, including resuming pressure options and the potential for future diplomacy”.⁴

However, this cable is most revealing not for its continued relevance to policymakers, but for the context in which it was written and the actions taken by the George H.W. Bush administration in the months following its release. The year 1991 saw the final collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the zenith of America’s “unipolar moment” of global dominance. It was during this brief period of optimism and relaxed tensions that President Bush enacted one of the largest unilateral disarmament initiatives in history. Known as the Presidential Nuclear Initiatives (PNIs), this policy saw the US withdraw most land- and sea-based tactical nuclear weapons, remove strategic bombers from alert, and stand down portions of the ICBM program. Crucially, the PNIs were launched without guarantees of reciprocation from Russia or any other nuclear power.⁵

The president announced the PNIs on a primetime television address on September 27, 1991. The announcement was remarkable because, unlike most nuclear weapons policies requiring years of planning and multiple agencies, the PNIs went from idea to implementation in less than a month and involved few people outside a core group of administration security officials.⁶ US allies also had little warning that the announcement was forthcoming and had only a few opportunities to provide input. Nowhere was this more apparent than in South Korea, where the US stored approximately 100 nuclear warheads, down from around 540 in 1976.⁷

² Alexander, David. “Obama says North Korea nuclear test a ‘grave concern.’” *Reuters*, May 25, 2009. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-usa/obama-says-north-korea-nuclear-test-a-grave-concern-idUSTRE54O14220090525>.

³ Byun, Duk-hyun. “U.S. must use maximum pressure to convince N. Korea it is safer without nukes: McMaster.”.. *Yonhap News Agency*, March 03, 2021. <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210303000300325>.

⁴ Pamuk, Humeyra and Shin, Hyonhee. “Blinken says U.S. weighs pressure, diplomacy on North Korea over denuclearisation and rights abuses.” *Reuters*, March 18, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-asia-southkorea-idUSKBN2BA08D>.

⁵ Fuhrmann, Matthew and Early, Bryan R. “Following START: Risk Acceptance and the 1991–1992 Presidential Nuclear Initiatives.” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Volume 4, Issue 1, January 2008, Pages 21–43.

⁶ Koch, Susan. *The Presidential Nuclear Initiatives of 1991–1992*. Center for the Study of Weapons of Mass Destruction. National Defense University. 2012. Accessed at <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA577537.pdf>.

⁷ Woolf, Amy F. and Chanlett-Avery, Emma. “Redeploying U.S. Nuclear Weapons to South Korea: Background and

Just four days prior to his address, President Bush met with his South Korean counterpart Roh Tae Woo at a General Assembly meeting of the United Nations in New York. According to officials, the PNIs were not discussed in the meeting. The upcoming nuclear weapons withdrawals were only made known to the Roh administration via a secret exchange between US Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Korean National Security Advisor Kim Jong Hwi. In these talks, it was left ambiguous as to whether air-delivered nuclear weapons, which were housed at a US base in South Korea, would be included in the PNIs.⁸

When *The Washington Post* reporter Don Oberdorfer exposed this lack of consultation in an article on October 19th, the South Korean administration reacted with disappointment and frustration. It had just been announced that the air-delivered nuclear weapons would, in fact, be removed from the peninsula, and the Roh administration looked as if it had been forced into accepting a unilateral move from the US that the North would interpret as a weakening of US commitment to South Korean security. The timing was particularly sensitive, as a planned North-South meeting was just days away. Kim Jong Hwi, who was to be a member of the South Korean delegation, made his displeasure known to the American ambassador, Donald Gregg. Gregg immediately cabled Washington:

“Kim said that people in Seoul were ‘really concerned’ about the absence of specific pre-consultation [...] Kim caustically noted that non-consultation was ‘nothing new’ and cited earlier unilateral announcements on the closure of U.S. air bases in Korea. He also pointedly referred to the contrasting pattern of prior consultation with our European allies.”⁹

Anxious to assuage Seoul’s concerns, Wolfowitz replied that “[...] we do take seriously any signal that could be erroneously interpreted by both the North and the South regarding the strength of our commitment” and promised to meet with Kim in the coming weeks.¹⁰ Subsequent exchanges continued, culminating in President Roh’s November 8, 1991 Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. This, in turn, led to the North-South Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula on January 20, 1992.

Implications in Brief.” *Congressional Research Service*. Accessed at <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R44950.pdf>.

⁸ Oberdorfer, Don. “U.S. Decides to Withdraw A-Weapons from S. Korea” *The Washington Post*, October 19, 1991. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/10/19/us-decides-to-withdraw-a-weapons-from-s-korea/3759ee3f-e9bf-4944-bfdf-2f9ea727b546/>.

⁹ “Cable, Amembassy Seoul 11234 to SecState, Subject: Further Korean Reaction to the [redacted] Initiative, October 21, 1991 (Secret)” <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4176670-Document-04-Cable-Amembassy-Seoul-11234-to>.

¹⁰ “Cable, Amembassy Seoul to Secretary of Defense, November 1, 1991, Subject: Consultations in Seoul, Secret” <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4176672-Document-06-Cable-Amembassy-Seoul-to-Secretary>.

The eventual collapse of the Joint Declaration and buildup of North Korea's nuclear weapons capabilities are too large a topic to discuss here, but the question remains: Between August and September 1991, why did the US advocate for maximum pressure on North Korea and close consultation with allies while secretly planning to deliver the greatest military *concession* to North Korea since the Korean War without informing Seoul?

In the account of his presidency, *A World Transformed*, President Bush does not mention Korea in connection to the PNIs, but instead focuses on the unprecedented scale of the withdrawal and its positive domestic reception.¹¹ Based on this and other reports, it seems that the threat of North Korea's nuclear program and the impact on US-ROK relations had little influence on the president's decision-making regarding the PNIs.¹² National Security Advisor Brent Snowcroft believed that the Roh administration wanted the weapons out and assumed the withdrawal would be relatively uncontroversial. His main concern was that the US remove its nuclear weapons in multiple arenas, so as not to give the North Koreans reason to think that the US was specifically abandoning Korea. He wrote: "In connection with its efforts to engage North Korea, South Korea was suggesting the removal of the US nuclear weapons located there. We did not wish to make such a move solely in Korea, concerned that the North might take our actions as the beginning of a US withdrawal."¹³ While it is true that there were voices in South Korea at the time calling for the removal of the nuclear weapons, the US' rapid implementation and lack of consultation undermined trust in the process.

In the optimism of the moment, the Bush administration hoped that a major concession like the unilateral removal of nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula would encourage North Korea to abide by its IAEA obligations. The administration, however, had misread Pyongyang's intentions at the time; this undercut the policy of united diplomatic action and maximum pressure described in the cable. It cleared the way for the North to be the sole possessor of nuclear weapons on the peninsula and weakened US leverage in future negotiations. Of course, one could argue that it was reasonable back in 1991 to assume that North Korea wanted to dismantle their nuclear program and integrate into the international community. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was about to lose its biggest benefactor and increasing engagement efforts from a democratic South offered the Kim Il Sung regime new avenues to relax tensions. If Pyongyang had reciprocated, the PNIs might be heralded today as the breakthrough arrangement that convinced North Korea to abandon its

¹¹ Bush, George H. W., et al. *A World Transformed*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1998.

¹² Koch, 2012.

¹³ Bush, 1998. p. 545.

nuclear weapons program.

Instead, US actions in 1991 are symbolic of the contradictory policies towards North Korea that it has pursued in the subsequent decades. Despite statements proclaiming US-ROK solidarity, administrations in Washington and Seoul are frequently out of step and even when they align, policymakers continue to confine themselves to ineffective “maximum pressure” campaigns or one-sided concessions that fail to change the calculus of the North Korean regime. Such was the case with President Trump’s 2017 threats of “fire and fury”, made just months after President Moon was inaugurated with the promise to improve inter-Korean relations. The following year, the summits between Trump and Kim Jong Un in Singapore and Hanoi and the 2019 trilateral meeting at Panmunjom, while rich in symbolism, bolstered Kim’s claims of legitimacy without requiring any reciprocity or change.

Perhaps President Bush could have been forgiven in 1991 for trying a tentative carrot and stick approach towards North Korea and for rushing through a symbolic piece of disarmament legislation that captured the spirit of the time. But after thirty years, many policymakers still do not accept that North Korea is too sophisticated at evading sanctions to succumb to loophole-ridden pressures and too ideologically entrenched to be enticed into fundamental reforms through concessions. This causes Washington and Seoul to engage reactively when Pyongyang raises and lowers tensions, hoping that the right balance of sanctions and summits will tempt the regime to denuclearize. The result is that policies continue to be inconsistent, both in application and duration. If Washington and Seoul want to present unified opposition to Pyongyang’s provocations, they must commit to coordinated, sustained, high-level engagement with the issue. But considering the Biden administration’s long list of domestic and international concerns, the myriad difficulties facing the Moon administration in its final year, and the underlying tensions in ROK-Japan relations, meaningful progress on the North Korean nuclear issue seems unlikely in the months ahead. ■

- **Ben Forney** is a PhD candidate at the Seoul National University Graduate School of International Studies. He previously worked as a Research Associate at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, focusing on North Korea's overseas networks and sanctions evasion measures. He has a MA in International Area Studies from Seoul National University and was a Fulbright Grantee to South Korea in 2009.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

“Consistent Inconsistency: What one thirty-year-old cable reveals about US-DPRK relations”

Date of Issue: 03 May 979-11-6617-123-9 95340

Typesetting: Kwang-min Pyo

For inquiries:
Kwang-min Pyo, Senior Researcher

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 203) ppiokm@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr