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# POLITICAL CRISES IN NORTHEAST ASIA:

AN ANATOMY OF THE TAIWAN AND KOREAN CRISES

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## ABSTRACT

This paper looks at two recent international crises in Northeast Asia: that across the Taiwan Strait in 1995–96 involving China, Taiwan and the US; and the nuclear missile crisis involving North Korea and the US (and largely indirectly, South Korea). Its objective is to analyse to what extent these situations were crises in the sense of posing a high risk of military conflict and a threat to the basic values of the countries involved.

The paper argues that in both cases the main purpose of the two countries (China and North Korea) initiating the events that were encompassed in the perception of crisis, was to gain the specific attention of the US. In China's case this was to counter the belief that the US had moved politically towards Taiwan; in North Korea's case, to achieve direct US links, free of South Korean intermediation, for its strategic, political and economic purposes. These purposes were recognised at best in only a limited way and this led to overreactions by the parties involved. Consequently, the crisis aspects of the two events were exaggerated to a degree and there was a substantial element of theatre in both cases.

There are specific lessons to be learnt from the management of these crises that are relevant to what in both cases are likely to remain problematic relationships. The paper also seeks to draw some more general conclusions relevant to the handling of other crisis events.

## POLITICAL CRISES IN NORTHEAST ASIA: AN ANATOMY OF THE TAIWAN AND KOREAN CRISES

*Stuart Harris*<sup>1</sup>

To discuss political crises in Northeast Asia we need a conception of what constitutes a political 'crisis'. The term has been used widely and often loosely to cover a range of situations that have occurred recently in Northeast Asia. They include domestic political happenings such as the South Korean economic crisis of 1997–98, the food supply problems of North Korea, more recently the November 2000 no-confidence motion against the Japanese prime minister, Mr Mori, and the situation currently surrounding the Chen Shui-bian presidency in Taiwan. Internationally, they include the periods of heightened tensions in Taiwan–People's Republic of China (PRC) relations, on the Korean Peninsula, or between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

This paper concentrates on two political crises with international dimensions—the 1995–96 missile crisis across the Taiwan Strait and the 1993–94 nuclear/missile crises in North Korea. These crises are generally regarded as the major political crises in Northeast Asia in recent years and both have the potential to recur. The paper follows Michael Brecher by taking as the two principal criteria for defining such a political crisis, first, a series of political developments posing a high risk of military conflict and, second, a threat to basic values (Brecher 1979). In the two cases under review, it was widely believed that the political developments involved posed a high risk of military

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conflict. They were also seen as threatening the basic values of the countries concerned.<sup>2</sup> Not all crises emerging from external developments meet the criterion of threatening a risk of war. For example, the oil crisis that faced Japan in the early 1970s had no military conflict potential but seemingly posed a threat to Japan's basic values.

While the crises examined here had external dimensions, I argue that internal politics were crucial. In James Richardson's study of great power crises, the sources of each state's crisis behaviour were found in its internal politics (Richardson 1994: 353).<sup>3</sup> As we will see, internal politics were important in the two examples considered here,<sup>4</sup> both because particular crisis-initiating actions by one country in each case reflected internal political concerns but also in terms of the constraints or otherwise on crisis management.<sup>5</sup>

Much of the debate in the West about the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis and the 1993–94 Korean crisis reflects internal differences of view over the international intentions and objectives of China and North Korea. Even though they were ostensibly at greatest risk, Taiwan and South Korea are seen as only part of this question but they play a critical role in shaping Western thinking in the broader context. In return, for China and North Korea, perceptions of the US in particular played a similar role.

In looking at these examples, I examine the nature of the crisis and its causes. Given that the tensions across the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean

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<sup>2</sup> Brecher includes a further criterion—a finite time to respond to the threat to basic values. The time constraint was less central to the Taiwan Strait issue but was important to North Korean crisis behaviour.

<sup>3</sup> This study provides a valuable precedent for examining the mechanics of crises and their management.

<sup>4</sup> I would note, however, that in both prime examples in this paper, precise understanding of the internal politics of a major participant, China in one case and North Korea in the other, is inevitably incomplete and views are contested.

<sup>5</sup> The importance or otherwise of internal influences on foreign policies is contested among international relations specialists. Neorealists such as Kenneth Waltz do not consider internal factors important; classical realists such as Thucydides, neo-liberals such as Robert Keohane and constructivists such as Peter Katzenstein do. For a useful discussion of the realist/liberal divide see Hoffman (1998: chapter 4).

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Peninsula were a consequence of underlying factors that were present long before, and predisposed the occurrence of the events in question, why did these crises emerge as and when they did? I look at the mutual understandings of the objectives and intentions of the parties involved, the responses—including any bargaining involved—and the possible lessons.

### THE 1995–96 TAIWAN STRAIT CRISIS

In March 1996, China fired four short range ballistic missiles at targets in the waters off Taiwan, one to the north and three to the south of the island. These missile firings represented a peak in a series of military exercises by China, including missile firings in the vicinity of Taiwan, over the eight-month period between July 1995 and March 1996 (Yang 2000: 1–3). During this time, Taiwan also engaged in military exercises, some with missile firings, in July and September/October 1995, and again early in 1996.

The March 1996 exercises were judged the most serious of China's exercises, with missiles falling closer, and close to, Taiwan's main ports, Kaohsiung in the south and Keelung in the north. While reportedly there was no interference with shipping in or out of Taiwan (Ross 2000: footnote 7), Taiwan's exchange rate fell significantly, as did prices on the stock exchange; foreign exchange reserves fell sharply; airline routes were changed and fishermen stayed at home (Mann 1999: 328–9). There were also more intense fears of escalation and of the dangers of errors. In response, the US sent two aircraft carrier battle groups to the area.

The crisis effectively ended on 25 March, two days after the election of President Lee with a significant majority, when China declared the military exercises ended.

#### *Background*

The crisis had both short-term causes and long-standing structural causes. In 1945, 'Taiwan once more became a province of China' (Lee 1999: 20). The potential for a military confrontation with the mainland arose in 1949, however, when the civil war between the communists and the nationalists

ended in stalemate. The nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek escaped to Taiwan (then Formosa) where they have remained. Both claimed to be the rightful government of a China that included Taiwan as part of China. Until the early 1970s Australia, along with the US and most other countries, supported Taiwan's claim. Taiwan's government had declared its intention to retake militarily the mainland, but although retaking some small offshore islands during the Korean War, ultimately disavowed this intention in 1987. Although its constitution still sees it as part of China, there has been a growing move in Taiwan to regard itself as separate from the PRC. Yet the PRC's view that Taiwan is part of China, and the Taiwanese view that Taiwan is largely independent *de facto*, remain the dividing issues. The tensions around this issue, while fluctuating in intensity, have continued over the succeeding years.

Although the tensions were largely between China and Taiwan, the Korean War had brought the US directly into the cross strait issue when, in June 1950, President Truman sent the US Seventh Fleet to block the Taiwan Strait. Subsequently, following China's shelling of the Nationalist held islands offshore the mainland (Quemoy and Matsu) in 1954–55, the US signed a defence treaty with Taiwan and the US subsequently helped Chiang to break another artillery blockade of the offshore islands in 1958 (Christensen 1996: 133–7).

The US naval involvement prevented either side from pursuing the civil war for the next two decades. When the US restored relations with the PRC from 1972 onwards, it 'understood' that Taiwan was part of China. Overall, for nearly three decades after 1949, the US was, in practice, Taiwan's patron, its formal defence treaty with Taiwan only being discarded when US relations were restored formally with China in 1979. There was an added understanding, however, subsequently reinforced by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act (TRA), that any reunification would be peaceful.

It is generally argued that there had been a period of relative stability, even of significant rapprochement, for several years before the Chinese took the actions that led to the 1995–96 crisis. Their reasons and their objectives



hence its overriding interest in reunification in some form with Taiwan—and its longstanding policy that a declaration of independence by Taiwan would lead to war, it had been watching with growing concern two developments that it saw as related. First was a strengthening of the pressure for Taiwanese independence under President Lee Teng-hui. Beijing regarded various actions by Lee as worrying. These included Taiwan's pursuit of UN membership that, if achieved, would constitute international acceptance of Taiwan's independence; Lee's 1994 'golfing' or 'vacation' diplomacy during which he met a number of Southeast Asian leaders; his ostensibly private visit to the US where he made an overtly political speech strongly promoting the Republic of China (ROC) as an independent sovereign state; Lee's closer identification with Japan than with China; and Lee's lukewarm April 1995 'six points' response to Jiang Zemin's January 1995 basically con Taipei relations.

Second was a US tilt towards Taiwan and away from US commitments under agreements between the two countries. Although the missile firings were a clear statement to Taiwan of the Chinese resolve, in many respects the message could be seen as a warning to the US. The 1992 US decision to sell 150 F16 war planes to Taiwan, which was in breach of the US pledge to China on such arms sales, and the US decision in 1995 to grant a visa to Lee Teng-hui so he could visit the US, which reversed longstanding US diplomatic practice, were particularly worrying. As Ross (2000: 100–01) notes, starting with the large sale of military aircraft to Taiwan, the visa decision came at the end of three years of an evolving US policy that leant increasingly towards Taiwan.

### *Objectives and signalling*

Understanding each other's objectives, information and communication of intentions is crucial in crisis situations if unintended escalation is to be avoided. In the events leading to the March 1996 crisis, communications had

been far from good. This was most notable in the American underestimation of the breach of its assurance to China that no visa would be given to President Lee, shortly before it was actually granted. It was also reflected in the US silence to the gradually intensifying rounds of Chinese military exercises that the US understood to be Chinese pressure to which it did not need to respond. Andrew Scobell's judgement, that Washington was 'asleep at the wheel' (Scobell 2000: 246), may be a little harsh, however, since there was some logic in a US view that China's exercises at least gave a useful message to Taiwan.

Diplomatic discussions, including a Jiang–Clinton meeting in New York in October 1995, appeared to have eased tensions temporarily, but this was a misperception by the US (Ross 2000: 100–01). China was not satisfied. Lee, moreover, continued with what China saw as provocative statements and actions, and Taiwan publicised the passage by a US carrier battle group through the Taiwan Strait. Although apparently for operational and not political reasons, Qimao Chen argues that the announcement of this passage by Taiwan infuriated the Chinese (Chen 1999: 131). The US also approved transit visas for senior Taiwanese political figures. This was seen as further illustration of the US 'lean' towards Taiwan. Consequently the decision was taken by China to pursue more substantial action.

It is often difficult to be clear on China's intentions, as the US misunderstandings of the earlier Taiwan Strait crises in the 1950s had indicated. At the time of the March 1996 crisis, however, communications on intentions were less evidently a major problem. Periodic discussions had been taking place between the US and Chinese officials on political and defence issues and, on the day the missile firings began, the Director of China's State Council Office of Foreign Affairs, Lui Huaqui, was in Washington for discussions on Taiwan issues. At these meetings, Lui gave details of the time, scale and location of the missile tests and made clear that no invasion or attack on Taiwan was intended. Taiwan intelligence sources were also aware of the limits of the exercises through Chinese military dispositions as was

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indicated subsequently by Chen Li-an, a presidential candidate and previously defence minister in the Kuoming Tang (KMT) government.<sup>6</sup>

As noted earlier, although China's actions were designed to be coercive in a limited way, it is an open question whether China's primary objective in 1995–96 was to coerce Taiwan or the US. Certainly, with respect to Taiwan, there were two major interlinked objectives. The Lee Teng-hui election campaign was seen as one where independence would be an issue and China wanted to discourage Taiwan's steps towards independence by conveying to Taiwan the major risks involved. Associated with this was a reputational objective, the need to ensure the credibility of its threat of force in the event of an independence declaration.

At the same time, China had failed to reverse diplomatically the US policy slide towards Taiwan, a slide that was encouraging Lee in his wayward ways. This led China to judge that a more forceful approach was necessary to get the US to recognise China's concerns about increasing US arms sales to Taiwan despite the 1982 agreed guidelines, and to recognise how seriously China took Taiwan's steps towards independence.

For its part, having warned China not to proceed with its exercises, US objectives in its response were to uphold its credibility and the credibility of its commitment to a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan conflict. Consequently, there appeared to be an irreconcilable face-off between China, wanting to change US and Taiwanese policies, and the US opposing China's actions and not prepared to accept coercion. Despite the apparent face-off, however, ultimately both sides achieved their objectives, although as Ross (2000: 89–90) concludes, both China and the US could have achieved those objectives without the costs involved.

Ross (2000: 110) notes that the US also had reputational objectives, indicating US resolve and credibility to the region. More, however, was made of that issue after the event than during. Moreover, the achievement of the objective of sustaining regional credibility was qualified, since the region generally supported China's position on Taiwan and did not favour outside

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<sup>6</sup> More details of these interchanges are given in Ross (2000) and Klintworth (2000).

interventions in such situations. Few countries in the region expressed open support for the US action.

*The role of internal politics*

Although these external factors were important, internal politics for all three parties were also significant in raising cross-strait tensions to the point of crisis. In this context, internal politics included the influence of differences over how to deal with coercive or threatening actions; the differences that arose from perceptions, often ideologically based, of the other's intentions; differences about how negotiations should be pursued; the influence of positions taken for political advantage domestically; and other factors adopted for reasons not related directly to the crisis.

*China*

The domestic politics of the Taiwan issue are regarded as crucial in Beijing. It is commonly argued that any leader who loses Taiwan will go down in Chinese history as a traitor, and that the regime's legitimacy will be undermined. As a result, the Taiwan issue is clearly embedded in domestic Chinese politics. Moreover, while many analysts believe that China sees the world in *realpolitik* or balance of power terms, it is also greatly influenced by its national perceptions and historical experiences.

Within China, the role of the US coloured much of China's approach to Taiwan. Sino-US relations have consistently been a basis of domestic contention, particularly since the end of the Cold War, with the issue of Taiwan seen as symptomatic of US antagonism. A widely held belief within China is that Taiwan is one means of implementing a US policy to contain China and to limit its growth in order to remain the hegemon. Views differ on this, but there was extensive suspicion in China of ultimate US intentions with respect both to China and Taiwan. On several occasions People's Liberation Army (PLA) leaders addressed formal communications to the political leadership complaining about what they saw as weak leadership on Taiwan, targeting particularly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its weakness in dealing with US antagonism. A hardline PLA policy may have had motives

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other than the Taiwan issue: advancing the PLA's political role as the guardian of party supremacy, and strengthening their case for resources.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in discussing the different expectations within China of whether or not there would be a US response to its March 1996 missile exercises, John Garver argues that, even for those expecting a US response, forcing the US to act would be useful because it 'would expose the true containment essence of US policy' (Garver 1997: 112).

John Copper (1999: 42) argues that at the time of the 1995–96 crisis, China's hostility to Taiwan was closely linked to a leadership struggle in Beijing, given the expected death of Deng Xiaoping, who was intimately connected to the Taiwan issue. Deng and those associated with him were vulnerable to charges that they were sacrificing the recovery of Taiwan to the cause of better Sino–American ties, a claim made from the opposite perspective at the time by Lee Teng-hui about the US. This view, however, has been challenged. Chen notes that while some observers believe the timing of Jiang's 'eight point' statement was mainly dictated by the desire to consolidate his power in the political transition, in practice the statement had had a long gestation (Chen 1999: 133). You Ji accepts that Jiang was criticised by his colleagues for what they saw as weakness towards Taiwan which in turn encouraged Lee to be more provocative. He believes it exaggerates, however, the divisiveness of the Taiwan issue in domestic Chinese elite politics. He argues that, on the contrary, Taiwan's provocations helped achieve a common response rather than a division of views among the Chinese leadership (Ji 1999: 77).

It is understood that there are differences among party leaders over the ways of handling the Taiwan issue. There were also communications from leaders in the southern provinces urging caution, but we do not know what influence they had. Overall, there is little suggestion that there were significant differences of objectives. Differences may have existed about methods, but it seems there were few major doubts in 1996 about the need for action such as the missile exercises.

<sup>7</sup> See for example Gurtov and Hwang (1998: 279).

*Taiwan*

Views within Taiwan differ markedly over relations with China. With the emergence of democratic processes in Taiwan, discussions about relations with China moved centrally into Taiwan's domestic politics arena involving succession, interest group and partisan politics (Chu 1999). No consensus existed—the main political divisions favoured support for independence, the status quo (often with ultimate reunification) and reunification respectively. For the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), then the main opposition to the KMT, Taiwanese independence was an important issue of policy principle. Much of the business sector in Taiwan, however, which gave considerable support to the KMT, was in favour of closer links with the mainland, and not all the KMT was solidly behind Lee's seemingly provocative stance towards the mainland. In 1993, the New Party was formed, mostly constituted from those in the KMT opposed to Lee's leadership generally, or to his cross-strait policies particularly.

Following the December 1993 Legislative Yuan elections, Taiwan was about to enter a presidential campaign with Lee as a candidate. Lee said on several occasions that, when elected, he would pursue high profile diplomacy. He was under pressure from those in the DPP seeking independence, and from the New Party which had done well in the December elections. China's missile exercises in the Strait did not dampen the Lee rhetoric since he knew there was no intention to attack Taiwan. For Lee, moreover, international events helped distract attention from domestic debate about issues of corruption, environmental pollution, and other issues on which his party was politically vulnerable.

*The US*

US policies on China and Taiwan have been important domestically for various reasons since the end of WWII. It has been argued that even the Seventh Fleet's location in the Taiwan Strait in 1950 was motivated partly at least to gain domestic support for Truman's involvement in the Korean War.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For background to these events, see Christensen (1996) and Klintworth (1995: chapter 3).

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Since then, a variety of factors have been important: anticommunist ideologies; the gradual emergence of democracy in Taiwan; arguments that China is potentially a threat to the US because of its political system and its hegemonic ambitions; partisan political belabouring of the administration; and defence industry interests, of which the 150 F16s were not the only example. Heavy financial incentives and other lobbying by Taiwan have been important in gaining US support for Taiwan's position. This was a factor leading to the heavy congressional pressure that gave rise to the Taiwan Relations Act. The Clinton administration's decision to give a visa to Lee was similarly a consequence of congressional pressure and an expensive Taiwanese lobbying effort to influence US politicians.

US administrations of both political colours have maintained a 'one China' policy. Congressional pressure over Taiwan policy has been applied to US administrations for a mix of genuine and partisan political reasons, but successive administrations have nevertheless attempted to maintain a policy of strategic ambiguity towards the strait.

In shaping the particular US response to China's missile firings, domestic political factors were important. Congressional pressure was intense on Clinton and the US Administration in the latter part of 1995 with Clinton sensitive to the forthcoming re-election campaign in 1996. Pressure was particularly intense for Secretary of Defense William Perry because of concerns that he was close to John W. Lewis of Stanford University, at the time the latest individual to be under attack from congressional conservatives, in this case for being involved in what they claimed were improper US transfers of sensitive technologies to China. Active involvement by the US in the crisis was itself not surprising, but the extent of that involvement was perhaps a reflection of those political pressures. Two carrier groups were a military and not just a political response, as one would have been. Given that the US knew that Taiwan would not be attacked when it made the decision, many outside China would argue that a political rather than a military response was required. Certainly, the Chinese believed the US response was excessive given that they had kept the US fully informed.

*Bargaining*

As Thomas Schelling argues, most conflict situations are essentially bargaining situations, explicit or implicit (Schelling 1980: 5). Moreover, bargaining processes are important for determining the scope or otherwise for accommodation. In the case of the Taiwan Strait crisis, little explicit bargaining took place during the crisis. China's aim was to ensure that the status quo was not changed against its interests. The US did not seek to negotiate with China over its intentions, merely to deter China from pursuing them. Yet it was indirectly a bargaining crisis in so far as China sought to use threats to coerce the US and Taiwan against making further changes to the status quo and this was successful. The US did, subsequently, reassure China of its firm commitment to the 'one China' policy and cautioned Taiwan against provocation.

*Was it a crisis?*

It is possible to argue that the 1995–96 events did not meet the criteria of a crisis as we specified earlier. Leaders of the US, Taiwan and Australia knew that the missiles were not targeted at Taiwan, and that war was not intended. Taiwan preferred the status quo and Beijing could accept the status quo provided that was the outcome.

If we accept the arguments of the Chinese about their intentions, which seem to have been supported by intelligence data, the 1995–96 crisis was largely theatre or, as Gurtov and Hwang put it, a 'phony crisis' (Gurtov and Hwang 1998: 277). Not everyone agrees, however, with the interpretation that the crisis reflected posturing or theatre rather than substance. At the time, some saw the possibility of war as real.

For those outside the small group with access to full information, the crisis appeared to threaten conflict. Moreover, it appears that the Japanese were not in the information loop or, at least, that the information was not passed to Japan's leaders. The Japanese were also not informed about the deployment of the Japan-based Nimitz aircraft carrier, a matter about which they later complained formally to the US. Nor were the respective publics effectively informed and so a sense of crisis was widespread. There were widely held fears that the missile firings could be ratcheted up to strike targets



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in Taiwan or could miss the target dangerously. It was feared that an unpredictable Lee Teng-hui could act recklessly and that, for whatever reason, the US and China could become involved directly in hostilities. Even if this particular crisis was theatre, the situation across the Strait remained one with considerable potential for a more consequential crisis.

### *Lessons*

The lessons to be drawn from this crisis include the understanding that to avoid escalation, the need for good and shared information is important. Pending this, action and response should be qualified, which would keep the heat of the crisis related to reality. It is apparent that in the period before the 1995–96 crisis, the substance of US policy making was often neglected in favour of the 'noise', much of it from the Congress. Hence messages failed to be heard. After the crisis, the US acted positively, starting a process that ended with an exchange of presidential visits and President Clinton's articulation of the 'three noes'. It is clear that the US and other third parties should be cautious in maintaining a balance between the two sides, and should avoid political adventurism.

The lesson for Taiwan was less well taken. Lee continued with his provocative diplomacy, and tensions were again high in 1998 and 1999 with American concern increasingly being articulated about Taiwan's wagging the US–China dog. The question, as Owen Harries (1999: 146) put it, was whether 'the United States should cede decisions over whether to go to war' to Taiwan? Ross (2000: 123) similarly says that the US cannot allow Taiwan's domestic politics to determine the politics of war and peace between the US and China. In the event, in order to win the election, Chen Shui-bian deemed it necessary to be much more cautious in his 1999 presidential campaign.

One lesson drawn by China from the intervention of the two carrier groups was that the US was more likely to intervene in any conflict across the strait and, while this has made China more cautious, it has also had a military response. China's purchase of two Sovremenny destroyers and anti-ship missiles from Russia are designed to increase the risk of US naval

deployments in the region, so raising the intensity, and potential danger, of any future crisis.

#### THE 1993–94 NORTH KOREA CRISIS

In the 1980s and early 1990s, US intelligence came to suspect that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was developing a nuclear weapons capability. The DPRK had signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985 at the urging of its then ally, the Soviet Union. Following a series of disputes with the inspectors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over the accounting procedures associated with the IAEA's inspections of its reactors and nuclear waste sites under the NPT, North Korea gave notice on 12 March 1993 that it would withdraw from the NPT 90 days later, on 12 June 1993.

The US saw the DPRK action as meaning that North Korea was deploying nuclear weapons and exporting weapons grade fissile material. More generally, the DPRK action undermined the NPT and the global non-proliferation effort. The DPRK said that the problem to which it was reacting could only be resolved through discussions with the US. Although reluctant to accept such discussions, the US finally agreed to enter into them both to satisfy the Chinese in the Security Council that normal diplomatic methods had been exhausted and to use them to convince the DPRK not to withdraw but to meet their NPT obligations. The US threatened, in the absence of success, to press the UN for international economic sanctions against the DPRK and in May, the Security Council indicated it would act if the DPRK withdrew from the NPT. In response, the DPRK said that UN sanctions would be construed as a 'declaration of war'. Ultimately, in the course of a series of meetings, the DPRK suspended its withdrawal notice, and an Agreed Conclusion emerged towards the end of 1993, involving a resumption of IAEA inspections. Tensions remained, however, and this agreement subsequently fell through because of differences over the proposed arrangements for an intra Korean dialogue.

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The second stage of the crisis emerged in May 1994. The IAEA suspected that, for its nuclear weapons program, the DPRK had extracted more plutonium than it had admitted. To determine whether this was so, the IAEA wanted to conduct a detailed analysis of the fuel rods of the DPRK's reactor. The IAEA was concerned that the unloading be done with their full cooperation, including isotopic analyses of the fuel rods, to enable checks to be made on the history of the DPRK's past extraction of plutonium. The US, in addition, had set the unloading of fuel rods except under IAEA supervision as a 'line drawn in the sand'. In May, however, North Korea decided to unload fuel rods from its small (5MW) reactor without permitting effective cooperation with the IAEA.

Some senior US officials viewed the decision to unload the fuel rods without effective IAEA involvement as designed to hide the history of nuclear fuel recovery. This provided justification for considering a preemptive military action against North Korea (Snyder 1999: 72). Concerned at the mounting tension between the US and North Korea, and the limited knowledge base of US officials regarding North Korea, ex-President Jimmy Carter, with the approval of President Clinton, met with North Korea's leader, Kim Il Sung, and helped pave the way for an agreed approach between the two countries. This ultimately developed into the Agreed Framework, including the establishment of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organisation (KEDO). On the basis of phased delivery of benefits, including provision of two light water reactors (LWRs), and supplies of fuel oil in the meantime, the DPRK agreed to freeze its nuclear program, and permitted inspections and other measures in accord with international concerns. This effectively ended the 1993–94 crisis.

### *Background*

The major structural factor in this case, as in the Taiwan Strait crisis, was an unfinished civil war, this time between North and South Korea. In this case, too, the US was directly involved following its 1950 entry into the Korean War as leader of a UN coalition. The US–South Korean alliance was a direct consequence. Apart from the North's sustained hostility and competition for

legitimacy with the South, there had been unrelenting hostility and mistrust of the US from that time. Indeed, the relations in both cases were crisis oriented. On North Korea's side, apart from its continuing threat of aggression against South Korea, a succession of North Korean terrorist actions occurred over much of the postwar period that only stopped in the late 1980s. On the US side, according to Leon Sigal, the US had threatened North Korea with nuclear weapons on at least seven occasions over the postwar period (1998: 33), and the US had based nuclear weapons in South Korea from 1957 to 1991 (Oberdorfer 1997).

With the end of the Cold War, North Korea's international position weakened, as did its negotiating strength. It lost its ally, the Soviet Union, and China's interest in North Korea diminished as China became more closely integrated into the global economic and political system. Scott Snyder notes that North Korea's objectives also changed because of its increasing economic difficulties. Thus the value of Cold War propaganda was replaced by the need for tangible outcomes, such as access to the international financial institutions, from its dealings with South Korea but more particularly with the West, notably the US (Snyder 1999: 9).

#### *Objectives and signalling*

Given the duration of the crisis and changes in the personnel involved, including a change in the US and South Korean administrations, objectives were not in all respects constant. It was widely believed that the DPRK's objective was to develop a nuclear arms capability, and US intelligence assessments tended to accept this as fact. Given the DPRK's increasingly isolated strategic position, this had its own intrinsic logic. Yet, the arguments against this idea—notably that North Korea had not reprocessed nuclear fuel rods to extract the necessary plutonium since 1991 and had deferred the unloading of fuel rods that would have enabled weapons grade plutonium to be extracted—also seem strong (Sigal 1998: 6). The long-term priority objective of the DPRK was increasingly seen rather as achieving a direct political and economic relationship with the US, unmediated by South Korea, in part to legitimise its regime and in part for negotiating purposes. As Carter

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indicated, however, and as had been made evident before, it also wanted security assurances from the US, mainly in relation to South Korea, who also had been pursuing its own plans for nuclear development.

The early US objective was to determine how much plutonium the DPRK had extracted in order to ascertain whether the North had nuclear weapons. Subsequently, the prime US aim changed, giving less weight to the past and more to any further uranium reprocessing, and to curbing future bomb making by the North, initially through adherence to the safeguards agreement under the NPT and then as part of a negotiated deal. As reflected in the text of the Agreed Framework, the US also wanted to achieve a process of normalisation including the DPRK's participation in Four Party (US, China, South Korea and DPRK) talks.

South Korea, while wanting to ensure the North did not produce nuclear weapons, wanted to be in control of the dialogues and, in particular, did not want direct US–North Korean talks or ties, if necessary by creating conditions designed to stop them. If they were to take place, however, it wanted serious North–South talks in place before the US–DPRK talks.

The IAEA was another player throughout the 1993–94 crisis and was a major, if not the major, player in its initial stages. The IAEA wanted full compliance with the safeguards agreement with North Korea. Most specifically, it wanted to document the history of reprocessing by North Korea and opposed negotiation.

The objectives of those countering the DPRK were not consistent. The South Korean and US objectives were not fully consistent since the US was prepared to accept direct links with North Korea but South Korea was not comfortable with that. The IAEA wanted a rigidly legal compliance but the North Koreans wanted to bargain over the nature of the inspections and were unwilling to concede without gaining some benefit in return. The IAEA's concern with both detailed compliance and with determining the history of reprocessing was at odds with the US as the US gave priority to the objective of stopping future nuclear development.

Signalling among the major participants was by no means clear, in part because of the nature of the regimes (notably that of the DPRK), but also in

part because of internal political influences. Misreading the DPRK's intentions accentuated the heat—thus the 90 day notice in the case of the 1993 crisis can be interpreted as a signal for negotiation. It was interpreted as irreversible by the US, and led in consequence to confrontation (Sigal 1998: 50). In the negotiations within the US–DPRK discussions, the DPRK sought specifically two light water reactors in return for giving up its own nuclear development. The DPRK's interest in light water reactors was a surprise to the US. This should not have been so since the DPRK had made a similar request to the IAEA in 1992, and to the Soviet Union in 1985.

Much of the subsequent debate has been about how far the motives and intentions of the North should have been discernible from analysing history. Snyder argues, as does Sigal, that the North Korea approach to the negotiating process was rational and consistent, as it had been for a long period. Snyder notes that North Korea's negotiators, 'used the tactics of crisis diplomacy to gain the attention of the United States' (1999: 69). This triggered the announcement by the DPRK of its withdrawal from the NPT and, later, withdrawal of the fuel rods from its reactor.

Snyder, for example, noted that the history of negotiation with North Korea indicated that coercion and compellence, or what Sigal calls the crime and punishment approach, were unlikely to be successful, but that comprehensive deal making was likely to be achievable. He instanced the DPRK's positive response to the withdrawal by President Bush in 1991 of nuclear weapons from South Korea. In that response, the DPRK signed its nuclear safeguards agreement with the IAEA, halted the reprocessing of spent fuel and delayed removing spent nuclear fuel from its reactor (effectively until May 1994) (Sigal 1998: 32). Yet 'the Bush administration ignored North Korea's efforts at accommodation' (Sigal 1998: 37). Despite such signs of responsiveness, the US rejected further approaches for some time in favour of the coercive approach because of basic perceptions about the DPRK regime and its methods, and US domestic political pressures.

A considerable learning process, however, did take place in the course of the bilateral US–DPRK discussions that involved improved signalling or, at least, some dispelling of misperceptions.

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*Internal politics*

Like China, North Korea's worldview reflects, among other things, its national perceptions and historical experiences. This includes Japanese colonialism and its own virtual destruction in the Korean War with the US and its allies. Differences consequently existed internally over the approach to take to the US during the crisis process. Those in the US who argued that reassurance would persuade the DPRK to give up its nuclear weapons program saw this as reinforcing the position of those in North Korea's leadership who favoured engagement with the US. While firm evidence on details of the domestic North Korean debate is limited, Chuck Downs notes that domestic factors included differences between hard and soft line factions in Pyongyang, DPRK umbrage at its loss of face during previous IAEA inspections, national paranoia, succession politics as Kim Il-Sung prepared to hand over power to Kim Jong Il, and anger at the resumption of Team Spirit, a large joint US/South Korea military exercise focused on North Korea (Downs 1999: 227–8).

The increasingly emotionally charged US domestic debate about how to deal with the DPRK divided along several lines. The idea that the DPRK was a hardline communist regime with a past record of seemingly irrational hostility to its neighbours and to the US, helped reinforce the view that normal diplomatic methods were therefore not applicable. There were also genuine differences of view among senior US officials and those politically committed regarding both North Korea's objectives and ways of dealing with North Korea. The widely held US view—within the administration, in Congress and in the media—that coercion and compellance was the way to achieve US objectives went hand in hand with the belief that any package arrangement that might involve accommodation would help the regime to survive. Simply stated, it was not possible to negotiate with the DPRK and the regime needed to fall. Partisan criticism of the Clinton administration was a contributing factor in the domestic debate. Domestic opposition constrained the approach of the US administration, limiting it to a coercive approach. Whilst some of this changed as tensions rose and as engagement with the DPRK progressed, and whilst the US administration accepted the need for accommodation, domestic criticism remained strong.

South Korean domestic politics under Roh Tae Woo and Kim Yong Sam, often encouraged by US hardliners, reflected many of the same positions, including concerns that concessions to the North would enable the North's regime to survive. As already noted, South Korea was anxious not to lose control of dialogue with the North, as it feared that its legitimacy vis-à-vis the North would be undermined, and the status of its own position vis-à-vis the US would be reduced. Once the US dialogue went beyond direct nuclear matters, to which the South had reluctantly agreed, this created difficulties in the South's relations with the US, with public criticism from President Kim. Korean nationalism was strong, and the belief was held that not only would the division on Korea be perpetuated, but that this division was in fact an American objective to justify maintaining a US troop presence. On the other hand, the military were concerned that rapprochement with the North would reduce its privileged position and its budget. Consequently, South Korea's attitude towards the US-DPRK dialogue was often difficult. It varied between supporting the US when there were problems, but creating obstacles when progress seemed apparent.

Internal politics were also significant for the IAEA. It had been slack and error prone in responding to North Korea's accession to the NPT. In addition, its overall effectiveness had been questioned following discoveries of large networks of undeclared nuclear facilities in Iraq. Consequently, it was eager to take the international lead on the DPRK nuclear issue and in 1993 the incoming Clinton administration, in particular, was comfortable with that. Moreover, it requested 'unprecedented and intrusive special inspections in

Given the internal US debate among the foreign policy community, the initial dependence of the US upon the IAEA and South Korea left it hostage to their internal politics. Ultimately, however, for a variety of reasons, the influence of domestic politics diminished as a major factor in the ultimate outcome. In particular, opposition to negotiations with the DPRK was ultimately not the dominant influence on the administration. What eventuated was a comprehensive package involving accommodation as well as deterrence.



*Bargaining*

Bargaining was more explicit in the Korean case than in that of Taiwan. Brinkmanship and crisis diplomacy is a characteristic of North Korea's negotiating approach, and it appears that the DPRK created a crisis situation consciously in order to gain the attention of, and to bargain with, the US.<sup>9</sup>

The internal divisions within the US over how to deal with the DPRK were important in shaping the US response to the crisis. The mix of beliefs that failure to adhere to international obligations under the NPT should be punished, that offering concessions to persuade adherence was succumbing to blackmail, and that any concessions would enable the DPRK regime to survive, provided a solid basis of opposition to anything but a coercive approach. Yet, as it became apparent that, short of actually proceeding with armed conflict, the coercive approach to the DPRK was unlikely to work, some form of bargaining became inevitable. In practice, the willingness of the US to enter into discussions with the DPRK involved an element of a bargain, since that was a DPRK legitimising objective in itself. Its strategy was a wider one, however, and that was to bargain with the US unmediated by South Korea. While, for some considerable time, the US was unwilling to enter into a substantial bargaining process, eventually it changed to a bargaining strategy. As the tensions rose in 1994, the US administration was able to overcome the differences with South Korea, the IAEA and its domestic critics to enable a bargaining strategy to work. Perhaps without the intensification of the sense of crisis in May 1994, internal politics may have been more significant.

Voices at a senior level in the US administration had wanted a more responsive US approach earlier—believing that the crisis had been prolonged by not offering 'enticing benefits' earlier and showing North Korea what was in it for them. In other words they wanted a tit-for-tat strategy, one posited by Robert Axelrod as the most likely to succeed in a bargaining relationship between parties that mistrust each other (Axelrod 1984: chapter 9). Others

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<sup>9</sup> The term 'crisis diplomacy' differs here from Richardson's (1994) use of the term. He prefers it to mean the management of a crisis once it is in being. For North Korea, it implies the creation of a crisis situation for negotiation purposes.

saw it as conceding to blackmail. Yet the final outcome, which was a tit-for-tat approach, achieved the US objective of a shutdown of the DPRK's nuclear program, and the DPRK meeting more fully its obligations under the NPT (including the safeguards agreement preventing reprocessing of the spent fuel and its eventual removal from North Korea). Sigal argues that ultimately, after 'three years of failure after failure with coercive diplomacy, it finally tried cooperation and succeeded' (1998: 4).

*Was it a crisis?*

Certainly, the rhetoric reached intense levels and a sense of a risk of war became palpable. At one dialogue with South Korea in March 1994, a DPRK representative predicted that war would turn Seoul into a 'sea of fire' widely reported. Less widely reported was a South Korean defence minister's remark some months earlier about the possibility of using military action to stop North Korea's nuclear program (Oberdorfer 1997: 294).

On the question of how close to war it came, debate continues. On the one hand, war or accommodation has been argued as a high risk but logical strategy for North Korea (Downs 1999: 259). On the other, accommodation was achieved by way of an agreement between Carter and Kim Il Sung. It was not evident that the DPRK wanted military conflict or were looking for an excuse to go to war; it would certainly not have prevailed. Much of the sense of fear was of a US military response, and the likely consequences. Yet although discussions had taken place on how such a response might be made, including the likely military costs, no specific action seems to have been taken by the US military, or by US decision-makers, to move towards implementing an attack on North Korea.

Could it have got out of control? Escalation is not always predictable but we need to think in terms of specific scenarios, most of which would seem improbable. One posited was that offering concessions might have indicated softness by the US with the DPRK then taking advantage of that softness. A more feasible one was that had the threatened imposition of sanctions towards the end of 1993 resulted, as expected, in a North Korean response and had that been countered, as planned, with precautionary movements of

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US troops and weapons, the DPRK would have almost certainly have mobilised. Even so, in both cases, only those who believed in the irrationality of the DPRK leadership might have judged significant escalation possible. On the US side, absent an irrational DPRK act, escalation was improbable because the limited justification and global consequences would have weighed heavily in the decision-making processes despite the heat of the external debate.

The fear, nevertheless, was real, given a heated public debate to which a breathless media and official comments inadvertently contributed by seeming to imply more than they meant. A comment from President Clinton that 'North Korea cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb' seemed apocalyptic in such a context. A possible US response was not the only question. A *New York Times* editorial (11 February 1994) cautioned that since the IAEA was making demands on North Korea beyond those agreed by the US, this could lead to a 'dangerous confrontation' on the Korean peninsula.

Developments since 1994 have been mixed. Despite considerable continuing opposition to the Agreed Framework and KEDO, it has continued as the major link between the West and the DPRK. For a long period, an increasing expectation that North Korea would collapse, given its growing economic problems, put the rationale of engagement into question while partisan US opposition remained intense as did opposition in elements of South Korean politics. Concerns heightened in Japan and Washington but less so in Seoul (Cossa 1999: 185), with the firing of a long-range missile by the North in 1998. The DPRK's missile program is now the centre of US attention, as well as a rationalisation for the US national missile defense (NMD) program.<sup>10</sup>

The difficulties of meeting the costs of the West's commitments under the Agreed Framework, notably through KEDO, its implementing authority, has been evident to the DPRK. One interpretation of the 1998 missile firing by

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<sup>10</sup> In August 1998, the DPRK launched a three-stage rocket that passed over Japan. Ostensibly to launch a satellite, and its trajectory was apparently consistent with that, it created intense concern in Japanese security and media circles. It was also significant in demonstrating a North Korean missile capability greater than then understood.

North Korea was that it was another use of the North's crisis diplomacy, a consistent, if probably counterproductive, repetition of the DPRK's brinkmanship. Development and likely sale of missiles by North Korea added to the political pressure on President Clinton from critics of the US policy. A commissioned review of that policy by former Defense Secretary Perry (1999) nevertheless argued the benefits of the Agreed Framework as the verifiable cessation of plutonium production, the basis for international checks on suspect underground sites, and resumption of North-South talks.

There was initially disappointment over the limited movement beyond the Agreed Framework towards normalisation. Despite the difficulties, however, there have been many positive developments including the summit between the two presidents, family exchanges, and the agreement to recover US 'missing in action' remains, with a second North South summit scheduled for 2001 and hopes in the South that 2001 will be 'a year of establishing peace' (*Chungang Ilbo* (Seoul), 3 January 2000, Internet edition).

Not all has been positive and not all positive developments came directly from the crisis. Leadership successions in North and South Korea led to changes in policies, particularly the South's 'sunshine' policy towards the North, and there was increased South Korean caution over a collapse of the North.

### *Lessons*

Ross has noted that the Taiwan crisis tells us 'how easy it is to stumble into a collision' with China (2000: 123). A similar conclusion can be drawn about North Korea. In considering the lessons of the Korean case, our analysis suggested that problems were magnified by various factors. These included a lack of willingness initially to consider bargaining; and a lack of consensus within the Washington bureaucracy and political system, often based on a lack of knowledge and understanding of North Korea, and an unwillingness to draw on what expert knowledge there was available on North Korea (a 1994 failure that particularly worried Carter). While information gaps were inevitable, more could have been done to reduce the largely ideological

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nature of the debate. There was also a problem of inconsistent objectives among the parties dealing with North Korea—the US, South Korea and the IAEA—that were not addressed fully in the early stages of the crisis.

Many of these problems were addressed implicitly in the recommendations of Perry's report (1999). That report endorsed the comprehensive package approach of accommodation and deterrence (although with the requisite denial of responding to 'blackmail'); sought more effective coordination of US policies and efforts to achieve more bipartisanship in Washington; and proposed a mechanism to coordinate more effectively among allies, notably South Korea and Japan. As well as the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG), the Four Party talks now help by involving South Korea directly while KEDO involves both South Korea and Japan. Perry added a further recommendation that related to pressures subsequently experienced in Washington: avoid threatening to abrogate the Agreed Framework in response to any future untoward action by the DPRK outside the Agreed Framework.

#### END NOTE

While it is important to look at these two crises and learn from the lessons drawn, in any crisis there are alternative visions and different lessons will be drawn from those different visions. Nevertheless, the two crises we have discussed, although different in important respects, have important similarities. In both cases it is possible to typify them as bargaining crises. This has a number of implications, among them that the normal bargaining practices are relevant, such as having a higher level authority available to appeal to, as for example the Carter/Kim exchanges in the DPRK case, as part of the bargaining 'game'.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, the overriding motivation of China and North Korea was to attract attention, most notably that of the US. China wanted to reverse the US tilt towards Taiwan, and North Korea wanted to gain international legitimacy, to improve its security (and that of its regime) and to gain economic

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<sup>11</sup> This could explain why the early involvement of the US and Chinese presidents at too detailed a level was unhelpful in the April 2001 US surveillance plane incident over Hainan Island.

benefits without going through the South. None of the countries involved wanted to reach an outcome that in actuality would have posed a major threat to the values of the major participants.

Consequently, in both cases there was a large degree of theatre in the event. In the Taiwan case in particular, the elites in the US and Taiwan knew that there was no intention by China to actually attack Taiwan. What starts as theatre, of course, can become substantive, given miscalculation or misperception. Again, withholding action and responses pending adequate information is desirable.<sup>12</sup>

Although unpredictable events intensified the crisis in both cases—inevitable given the important role of individuals and the possibility of accidents—structural factors provided the conditions in which the crises could emerge. Yet, while structural factors include the underlying attitudes within each party, the responses in China and North Korea were basically contingent upon and reactive to the actions of the other parties. Internal politics and circumstances were critical in giving rise to both the conditions for the crises and the responses to those emerging conditions with ideological based perceptions being a barrier to rational judgements.

The DPRK case in particular illustrated the notion that emotion and ideology can affect judgements in a way that is hard to manage, and can lead to discordant public views from supposedly objective officials. Thus CIA Director James Woolsey took a political rather than analytical position in public thereby raising the heat of the public debate.<sup>13</sup> Kim Yong Sam reversed his apparent support for US policy at one stage in the light of his electoral politics of the day.

While international institutions were not participants in the Taiwan situation, the Security Council and the IAEA had a direct interest in the Korean case. This raised issues of the at times ambiguous relationship

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<sup>12</sup> This would have been helpful for the April 2001 incident.

<sup>13</sup> Oberdorfer (1997: 306–07) reports that the CIA acknowledged that they overestimated North Korea's likely plutonium availability. This not only led to exaggerated conclusions about the North's potential for nuclear bombs but reinforced views of the unreliability of the North's explanations which, they later acknowledged 'could have been right'.

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between the US and the Security Council. In part this is because the Security Council has limited intelligence capacity and capability for implementing its decisions, and tends to rely heavily on the US. Thus, in the dispute with the US, the Security Council was not seen as a neutral party, although China's involvement helped to qualify such a judgement.

The IAEA's involvement raised different issues. It could be seen as being too close to the US particularly when, following the Iraq linked criticism, the IAEA was given the right to accept US intelligence, bringing its neutrality into question. This was a view argued by the DPRK and, however defensible the IAEA's objectives in the initial stages, it was seen as pursuing US objectives. US objectives and those of the IAEA subsequently diverged posing different problems. Bargaining in the crisis meant that the legalisms of the international institution were basically overridden.

The lessons from these experiences are not simple. In relationships that are problematic, careful interpretation of messages, free of ideological or other blanket presuppositions, is critical. Hostile rhetoric may imply hostile intent, but it may not, and differentiating between the two can prevent differences emerging as crises. Once a political crisis situation has emerged, limiting action and responses to what is needed for insurance purposes, pending adequate clarity as to what is involved, is important.

What is also common with other crises, such as the economic crisis of 1997 onwards, is the need for a clear and comprehensive coordinated strategy based on more detailed and objective knowledge and understanding at the official, political and public level of the specific structural and political circumstances involved, and the long-term policy objectives being sought.

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