NEGOTIATING WITH NORTH KOREA:
LESSONS LEARNED AND FORGOTTEN

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ABSTRACT

The experience gained from dealing with North Korea from 1993-2000 is largely forgotten. During those years, the US and the DPRK logged thousands of hours of contact. The inability of most observers to remember the legacy of these contacts is a central reason for the sterile nature of the diplomacy since 2001. Conventional wisdom remains the same: It is impossible to deal with the North Koreans. Yet, from 1993-2000, the US Government had more than twenty issues under discussion with the North. A large percentage of those talks ended in agreements, almost all of which went beyond the declaratory stage to concrete implementation. The range of subjects expanded, moving past the 1994 Agreed Framework and finally culminating in the October 2000 US-DPRK Joint Communiqué, which laid a foundation for new progress. The path was bumpy, with numerous mistakes. Nevertheless, lessons were learned and put to good use. These lessons the new administration discarded in favor of its own mythology when it took office in January 2001.

In diplomacy, beginning from scratch is not unprecedented, nor by itself necessarily a bad thing. In early June 1993, a United States negotiating team assembled in New York to deal with a crisis caused by a Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK—North Korea) announcement of its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). The principal members of the US team had never met a North Korean before and knew virtually nothing about North Korean history, culture, economy, or political system. When talks began, the crisis seemed to be about to go over the edge. Instead, after nine tense days, the US and North Korea agreed on 11 June on their first-ever

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joint statement, beginning eight years of intense negotiations and diplomatic accomplishments.

The experience gained from dealing with North Korea over that period (1993-2000) has now largely vanished into a thicket of misapprehension and myth. Even where there has been some attention to the detail of events during those years, most of the focus has been on the Agreed Framework, signed the following year. But the negotiating experience gained is broader—and the lessons much deeper—than simply the 1993-94 talks that culminated in the Agreed Framework of 21 October 1994.

From 1993-2000, the US and North Korea logged thousands of hours of face-to-face contact in formal and informal settings. The inability of most observers to remember, much less utilize, the legacy of these contacts is perhaps one of the central reasons for the sterile nature of the diplomatic process and the shallowness of the public discussions on the Korean issue during much of the Bush Administration. By contrast, the inability of the North Koreans to forget that legacy compounds their disdain for the current US approach, which explicitly rejects the achievements of the past, even as a basis for forging new agreements. The most recent efforts by current US officials to distance their accomplishments from those of the past would be comical if they were not so painful to watch.

1 THEMES AND TOPICS

1.1 You can’t deal with them

The conventional wisdom, at least in the US, is much what it has always been: It is not possible—or at best, nearly impossible—to deal with North Korea. Forgotten is the reality that from 1993-2000, the US Government had twenty or more different issues under discussion with the DPRK in a wide variety of settings.² A large percentage of those talks ended in agreements or made substantial progress. Almost all of those agreements went beyond the declaratory stage and entailed concrete and complex implementation. In the first years after the Agreed Framework was signed in October 1994, most of the talks were linked to implementing that document. The range of subjects

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² A list of these discussions and negotiations will be found at the end of this article.