

Overview and Caveats

This handout applies critical thinking to Iran and North Korea, two of the so-called “rogue states.” While both are far from paragons of virtue, critical examination will show that many of their seemingly inexcusable, provocative actions are either open to question or more understandable when viewed through a filter other than our own. Because the goal here is to present evidence that questions the mainstream view, two caveats are in order.

First, I am not including evidence that supports the mainstream view since I assume you are well enough exposed to that perspective. The mainstream view has value, but as with light being a wave or a particle, so does the opposing point of view emphasized here.

Second, the evidence that I present here is also open to question. For ease of exposition, I will not constantly remind you that all news reports, including those cited here, can be subject to error. I am not trying to prove that the mainstream view is wrong, just that it deserves critical reexamination.

Critical Thining Applied to Iran

We view our relationship with Iran through the prism of 1979 when, in violation of all international norms, Iranians stormed our embassy and took its personnel hostage. In contrast, the Iranian viewpoint revolves around 1953, when a CIA-backed coup overthrew the popular, democratically elected Mossadeq government and installed the Shah, beginning what many Iranians regard as a twenty-six year reign of terror under a police state. (Of course, when that regime disintegrated, it led to an even worse reign of terror under the ayatollahs.)

In spite of the antagonism and fear that Iran and Israel bear for one another, there is a surprising parallel between their world views which is described by Iranian emigre Trita Parsi in his book, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*:

And like Israelis, Iranians are deeply suspicious of the outside world. While Jews have been persecuted and have survived a Holocaust, Iranians have fought colonization, annexation, decades of foreign intervention, and, last but not least, an eight-year war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, in which virtually the entire world – including the United States – sided with Iraq. When Saddam invaded Iran in 1980 ... it took the Security Council more than two years to call for withdrawal of the invading forces. (Compare that to Saddam’s 1990 assault on Kuwait, when a Security Council resolution passed within 12 hours of the invasion) ... Another five years passed ... before the UN addressed Saddam’s use of chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and civilians. (The United States and Western European countries either directly sold components for chemical weapons to Saddam or knew and quietly approved of such sales.) ... The United States

later cited the same crimes to justify its invasion of Iraq in 2003. For the Iranians, the lesson was clear: When in danger, Iran can rely on neither the Geneva Conventions nor the UN charter for protection. Just like Israel, Iran has concluded that it could rely only on itself.

Our practice of threatening Iran, particularly with nuclear weapons, has the unintentional effect of increasing its motivation to develop a nuclear capability. (Even though you may not have seen the following articles which threaten Iran, it is hard to imagine that Iranian intelligence overlooked them, and there are many more.) In 2006, Seymour Hersh wrote in [The New Yorker](#):

A senior Pentagon adviser on the war on terror expressed a similar view. “This White House believes that the only way to solve the problem is to change the power structure in Iran, and that means war,” he said. The danger, he said, was that “it also reinforces the belief inside Iran that the only way to defend the country is to have a nuclear capability.” ... One of the [American] military’s initial option plans [for destroying Iran’s nuclear program] ... calls for the use of a bunker-buster tactical nuclear weapon, such as the B61-11, against underground nuclear sites.

Jeffrey Goldberg’s [September 2010 article](#) in *The Atlantic* also had the unintentional effect of adding urgency to Iran’s nuclear program. Goldberg interviewed Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and concluded that either American or Israeli military action against Iran was likely:

Netanyahu’s belief is that Iran is not Israel’s problem alone; it is the world’s problem, and the world, led by the United States, is duty-bound to grapple with it. But Netanyahu does not place great faith in sanctions ... based on my conversations with Israeli decision-makers, this period of forbearance, in which Netanyahu waits to see if the West’s nonmilitary methods can stop Iran, will come to an end this December. ... Several Arab leaders have suggested that America’s standing in the Middle East depends on its willingness to confront Iran. They argue self-interestedly that an aerial attack on a handful of Iranian facilities would not be as complicated or as messy as, say, invading Iraq. ... Benjamin Netanyahu feels, for reasons of national security, that if sanctions fail, he will be forced to take action.

Somewhat ironically, the father of the Iranian revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, shut down the Shah’s nuclear program as un-Islamic when he first came to power. *Newsweek* columnist Fareed Zakaria [wrote in 2009](#):

Everything you know about Iran is wrong, or at least more complicated than you think. Take the bomb. ... President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has quoted the regime’s founding father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who asserted that such weapons were “un-Islamic.”

The country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a fatwa in 2004 describing the use of nuclear weapons as immoral. In a subsequent sermon, he declared that "developing, producing or stockpiling nuclear weapons is forbidden under Islam." Last year Khamenei reiterated all these points after meeting with the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei. Now, of course, they could all be lying. But it seems odd for a regime that derives its legitimacy from its fidelity to Islam to declare constantly that these weapons are un-Islamic if it intends to develop them. It would be far shrewder to stop reminding people of Khomeini's statements and stop issuing new fatwas against nukes.

Following a civilian nuclear strategy has big benefits. ... And if Tehran's aim is to expand its regional influence, it doesn't need a bomb to do so. Simply having a clear "breakout" capacity¹ – the ability to weaponize within a few months – would allow it to operate with much greater latitude and impunity in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Only after Iraq used chemical weapons against Iran in the early 1980's and the world was silent, did Iran restart its nuclear weapons program. Henry Sokolski's article "The Bomb and Iran's Future" in the June 1994 issue of *The Middle East Quarterly* (Vol. I, No. 2), notes that in 1988 (after Iraq had used chemical weapons in its war with Iran), Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then speaker of Iran's Parliament and commander-in-chief of its military, in a speech delivered to Iranian soldiers, said:

With regard to chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons training, it was made very clear during the [Iran-Iraq] war that these weapons are very decisive. It was also made clear that the moral teachings of the world are not very effective when war reaches a serious stage and the world does not respect its own resolutions and closes its eyes to the violations and all the aggressions which are committed in the battlefield. ... We should fully equip ourselves both in the offensive and defensive use of chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons. From now on, you should make use of the opportunity and perform this task.

Other events during the Iran-Iraq war added to Iran's mistrust of the United States. One of these occurred on July 3, 1988, when a guided missile cruiser, the USS *Vincennes*, shot down an Iranian airliner, Iran Air flight 655, killing all 274 people on board. To understand the Iranian mindset on

¹ Uranium enrichment is particularly well suited to a breakout capacity. Once a nation has enough highly enriched uranium (HEU) to make a bomb, it is possible to build a usable weapon without testing, much as the Hiroshima HEU design was never tested before use. Only the more complex plutonium-based weapons, such as that used on Nagasaki, require testing to have high confidence that they will work as designed. This is why Iran's uranium enrichment program, although also applicable to its peaceful nuclear program and allowed under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, is of such great concern. It is one of the reasons why I believe that "atoms for peace," at least in its current form, is an oxymoron.

this incident, it helps to go back five years in time, to September 1, 1983, when the Soviet Union shot down a Korean airliner, KAL flight 007, after it had twice violated Soviet airspace in a sensitive region. President Reagan that incident in the [following terms](#) (or watch it on [YouTube](#)):

I'm coming before you tonight about the Korean airline massacre, the attack by the Soviet Union against 269 innocent men, women, and children aboard an unarmed Korean passenger plane. This crime against humanity must never be forgotten, here or throughout the world. ... this attack was not just against ourselves or the Republic of Korea. This was the Soviet Union against the world and the moral precepts which guide human relations among people everywhere. It was an act of barbarism, born of a society which wantonly disregards individual rights and the value of human life and seeks constantly to expand and dominate other nations.

It is reasonable to assume that many Iranians saw the Iran Air 655 tragedy much as President Reagan did the loss of KAL 007 – a barbarous massacre and a crime against humanity. In comments immediately after Iran Air 655 was shot down President Reagan alleged that differences in the two incidents voided that comparison.:

I won't minimize the tragedy. We all know that it was a tragedy. But we're talking about an incident in which a plane, on radar, was observed coming in the direction of a ship in combat. And the plane began lowering its altitude. And so I think it was an understandable accident to shoot and think that they were under attack from that plane. ... With regard to the Soviets comparing this to the KAL shoot down, there was a great difference. Our shot was fired as the result of a radar screen of a plane approaching it at quite a distance. Remember, the KAL – a group of Soviet fighter planes went up, identified the plane for what it was, and then proceeded to shoot it down. There's no comparison.²

The last difference quoted by President Reagan appears to be correct. The *Vincennes* did not have visual contact when it shot down Iran Air 655, whereas the Soviet pilot who shot down KAL 007 did make visual contact before firing. According to [Wikipedia](#), in a 1991 interview with *Izvestia*, he stated:

I saw two rows of windows and knew that this was a Boeing. I knew this was a civilian plane. But for me this meant nothing. It is easy to turn a civilian type of plane into one for military use ... We shot down the plane legally ... Later we began to lie about small details: the plane was supposedly flying without running lights or strobe light, that tracer

² QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS WITH PRESIDENT REAGAN REGARDING: USS VINCENNES SHOOTING DOWN OF IRANIAN AIRCRAFT WHITE HOUSE SOUTH LAWN 12:00 P.M. EDT MONDAY, JULY 4, 1988, obtained from Federal News Service archives.

bullets were fired, or that I had radio contact with them on the emergency frequency of 121.5 megahertz.

In a [CBS News special](#), Ted Koppel alleges that the downing of Iran Air 655 was a consequence of a much larger alleged subterfuge in which half of Iran's navy was sunk by American warships.³ That investigative report also alleges that – contrary to official US statements – the *Vincennes* had violated Iranian territorial waters, and that the US Navy was trying to provoke the Iranian Navy at the time of the incident. Such actions would make the captain of the *Vincennes* more likely to mistake an airliner for a fighter sent to attack his ship. [Some reports](#) also allege that he had a trigger-happy reputation that led to his ship being sarcastically referred to as “Robocruiser” by others in the fleet.

To summarize, here are the main ways that the United States has unwittingly encouraged Iran's nuclear ambitions:

- Aiding the 1953 coup that replaced the democratically elected and popular Mossadeq government with the Shah's police state.
- Aiding Iraq during its 1980's war with Iran, even though Iraq was the aggressor.
- Continuing to aid Iraq in that war even though it used chemical weapons against both Iran and its own Kurdish minority.
- Shooting down Iran Air 655 and sinking a large part of the Iranian navy.
- Threatening Iran with both conventional and nuclear weapons. This was particularly pronounced during George W. Bush's presidency, but was reiterated implicitly in President Obama's 2010 Nuclear Posture Review.⁴

None of the above should be construed as meaning that I favor a nuclear-armed Iran. On the contrary, I see such a development as extremely dangerous. But we need to start formulating our foreign policy based on reality, not myths. The most popular – and the most dangerous – myths are those that overly demonize adversaries and glorify ourselves.

So, what can be done about Iran's nuclear ambitions? Given all the past mistakes, we do not have any really good options at this point in time. We need to learn from our past mistakes so we do

³ This link is to a 1992 ABC TV newscast by Ted Koppel, but I was unable to find it on ABC's web site. That raises questions, but given that 1992 preceded the Internet and stories on official web sites are sometimes removed, it is not damning evidence. Given the completeness of the report and the risk associated with an outright forgery, I believe it to be accurate, but am not certain.

⁴ Also see my August 2010 blog, [“Two Takes on Attacking Iran.”](#)

not repeat them, and hope we can make it through an interim period until Iranian-American relations improve to the point that real solutions become possible. One thing we could do would be to stop publicly threatening Iran. I realize that domestic politics currently makes that impossible – Obama would be skewered as an appeaser and weak on national security. But, if more Americans understood the reality that threats intensify Iran’s nuclear efforts, I believe that would change. Another action we could take to reduce the risk of a nuclear-armed Iran is to improve our relationship with Russia. That relationship is in better shape, much easier to repair, and suffers primarily from misunderstandings (more on that in a later handout). And, as noted by Dimitri Simes, a former advisor to President Reagan in an [April 2010 essay](#) in TIME:

There is no mystery of what might make Moscow more cooperative on Iran. Far-reaching sanctions would cost Russia billions. To compensate Russia, Washington would need to facilitate greater economic cooperation, and as Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has stressed on several occasions, this would require canceling the Jackson-Vanik amendment and helping Russia gain membership in the WTO. However, these moves would face opposition in Congress. The Administration has indicated that this would be the right direction to take but has not yet made an effort to make that happen.

If it wasn’t so serious, this matter would be even more comical because the Jackson-Vanik amendment is a holdover from the Cold War that no longer has any real purpose. It was enacted in 1974 to punish the Soviet Union for preventing free emigration of its Jewish population. Now that several million former Russian Jews live in Israel and the United States, it is an anachronism that convinces Russia that Cold War thinking is still alive and well in the United States. For more details on Jackson-Vanik see my [February 2011](#) and [October 2010](#) blog posts.

North Korea

Background: Applying critical thinking to North Korea requires going back at least as far back as August 1945, when the war in the Pacific ended. As explained, in a [report](#) sponsored by the United States Army,⁵ the very existence of South Korea was a concession on Stalin’s part:

On August 8, 1945, during the final days of World War II, the Soviet Union declared war against Japan and launched an invasion of Manchuria and Korea. By then, Japan had been depleted by the drawn-out war against the United States and its Allies and Japanese forces were in no position to stave off the Soviets. ... Although the United States president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Marshal Josef V. Stalin of the Soviet Union had agreed to establish an international trusteeship for Korea at the Yalta Conference of

⁵ Andrea Matles Savada and William Shaw, Editors, *South Korea: A Country Study*, Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1990. I am indebted to Prof. Barton Bernstein for pointing out this fact, of which I had previously been unaware.

February 1945, no decision had been made on the exact formula for governing the nation in the aftermath of Allied victory. The landing of Soviet forces, however, compelled the United States government to improvise a formula for Korea. Unless an agreement were reached, the Soviets could very well occupy the entire peninsula and place Korea under their control. Thus, on August 15, 1945, President Harry S. Truman proposed to Stalin the division of Korea at the thirty-eighth parallel. The next day Stalin agreed. Evidently Stalin did not wish to confront the United States by occupying the entire peninsula. He may also have hoped that the United States, in return, would permit the Soviet Union to occupy the northern half of the northernmost major Japanese island, Hokkaido [which we did not].

A statement by Secretary of State Dean Acheson just prior to the Korean War, also provides a different perspective from the usual perspective that North Korea's attack came out of the blue. The following excerpt from Acheson's January 12, 1950, [speech](#) at the National Press Club, has led some to argue that he gave North Korea a green light⁶ to invade the South in an attempt to reunify the country:

So far as the military security of other areas in the Pacific [including Korea] is concerned, it must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack. But it must also be clear that such a guarantee is hardly sensible or necessary within the realm of practical relationship. Should such an attack occur, one hesitates to say where such an armed attack could come from, the initial reliance must be on the people attacked to resist it and then upon the commitments of the entire civilized world under the Charter of the United Nations, which so far has not proved a weak reed to lean on by any people who are determined to protect their independence against outside aggression.

The Korean War followed Acheson's speech by six months. According to a Defense Special Weapons Agency report, *Nuclear Weapons That Went to War*, the United States entertained using nuclear weapons against North Korea on three occasions. (The relevant material is also available as a [separate chapter](#) on the Korean War.)

North Korea Freezes Nuclear Program Under the "Agreed Framework": Fast-forwarding to the current decade, a leading expert on Korea, Prof. Bruce Cumings of the University of Chicago, [wrote](#) in 2003:

⁶ A similar accusation has been made with respect to the first Gulf War. A week before Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the American Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie, appears to have told him: "We have no opinion on your Arab-Arab conflicts, such as your dispute with Kuwait. Secretary Baker has directed me to emphasize the instruction, first given to Iraq in the 1960s, that the Kuwait issue is not associated with America."

In June 1994, Bill Clinton came close to launching a ‘pre-emptive strike’ against North Korea’s nuclear reactors at Yongbyon, about sixty miles north of Pyongyang. Then, at the last minute, Jimmy Carter got North Korea to agree to a complete freeze on activity at the Yongbyon complex, and a Framework Agreement was signed in October 1994. The Republican Right railed against this for the next six years, until George W. Bush brought a host of the Agreement’s critics into his Administration, and they set about dismantling it, thus fulfilling their own prophecy and initiating another dangerous confrontation with Pyongyang. ...

Every year since [1993] the CIA Director has told Congress that ‘the chances are better than 50:50’ that North Korea has one or two bombs (not devices), and newspapers have routinely reported this assumption as fact. Yet in 1996, nuclear experts at the Livermore and Hanford laboratories reduced their estimate of how much fuel North Korea possessed to less than the amount needed for a single bomb⁷: the North, they concluded, could only have seven or eight kilograms of fuel, whereas ‘it takes ten kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium to fabricate a first bomb,’ and eight or nine kilograms for subsequent ones. ... In other words, the CIA’s educated guess, endlessly repeated in the media, appears to have been mistaken. A less obvious consequence of this mistake has been its role in strengthening the North’s position in negotiations with the US.

American Threats: Adding to North Korea’s fears, a July 2006 essay in TIME by Prof. William Perry (formerly Secretary of Defense under Bill Clinton) [advocated a pre-emptive American attack](#) on North Korea’s missile program:

Although the July 4 [2006] test of the Taepo Dong 2 missile—which is intended to carry nuclear warheads to U.S. territory – appears to have failed, North Korea ... has crossed a line in the sand clearly drawn by the U.S. and its partners. We anticipated that North Korea would ignore the U.S.’s warnings. That’s why, in an opinion piece published in the *Washington Post* on June 22, we urged the Bush Administration to strike the Taepo Dong 2 on its launchpad before the test could be conducted. ... Critics of our article, including members of the Bush Administration, say that a pre-emptive strike is too risky. But if the U.S. is ever going to defend a line in the sand with North Korea, that is the least provocative way to do it, and next time it will only be riskier. Such a strike could be seen by the North Korean leadership for what it is: a limited act of defense of the U.S. homeland against a gathering threat, and not an overall attack on North Korea. For the U.S., the risk of inaction will prove far greater. The Pyongyang regime will view its stockpile of missiles and nuclear material as tipping the regional balance in its favor and providing a shield behind which it can pursue its interests with impunity.

⁷ Prof. Hecker’s estimate, detailed later in this section, is in agreement with the data cited by Cumings.

A [related threat](#) was made in September 2009 when North Korea stated that it planned to launch a satellite, but its adversaries feared it was really testing a missile:⁸

In unusually blunt remarks, Admiral Timothy Keating, commander of the US Pacific Command based in Hawaii, said that interceptor ships were ready "on a moment's notice. Should it look like it's something other than a satellite launch, we will be fully prepared to respond as the president directs," he said in a recent interview with ABC News.

Former Los Alamos Director's Perspective: Even when North Korea has cooperated, it has felt unrewarded. Prof. Siegfried Hecker, former Director of Los Alamos, has been a major player in attempts to resolve the disputes between our nation and North Korea, and has made seven trips there since 2004. His paper "[Denuclearizing North Korea](#)," in the May-June 2008⁹ issue of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* indicated great hope for stopping that nation's nuclear weapons from advancing, *if* the United States would take certain actions, which it did not:

During the past four years, I've visited North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear complex three times with nongovernmental teams of scientists and observers. My visits to the complex and my meetings with North Korean officials have convinced me that the elimination of North Korea's plutonium production capacity is within reach. ...

Based on my February visit, I judge the disablement actions to be serious and in good faith. I believe that Pyongyang has made the decision to permanently shut down plutonium production if the other parties do their part. However, they have retained a hedge to be able to restart the facilities if the agreement falls through. ...

The Six-Party process has put within reach the possibility of permanently shutting down the entire Yongbyon plutonium production complex; it is highly unlikely that North Korea has clandestine plutonium production facilities. Eliminating Yongbyon's plutonium production is the highest technical priority for the parties negotiating with North Korea because doing so would dramatically reduce the risk posed by the North Korean nuclear program. To do so, these countries should put the burden on North Korea to finish disabling the Yongbyon complex and to begin dismantling it. During my February visit, North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials said that they have slowed the discharge of fuel from the reactor (one of the last disablement actions) because the other five parties had not lived up to their October 3, 2007 commitments. Specifically, as of February 14, 2008, only 200,000 tons of the promised 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil had been delivered, and

⁸ [According](#) to U.S. envoy to North Korea Stephen Bosworth, a missile test would be a violation of a U.N. resolution. Not surprisingly, the North views such resolutions very differently.

⁹ This was after North Korea's first nuclear test (October 2006), but before its more successful, second test (May 2009). The first test is estimated to have had a yield of under a kiloton, while the second is believed to be in the 5 kiloton range – almost as destructive as those used at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

South Korea and China had provided very little of the promised 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil equivalent. In addition, the United States had not removed North Korea from the states sponsoring terrorism list and had not terminated application of the Trading with the Enemy Act – two other conditions of the October agreement.

Early in 2010, I asked Prof. Hecker if his view had changed in light of North Korea's second nuclear test on May 25, 2009. He told me he was working on a paper that would answer that question, and it is [now available](#). Here are the parts of that paper that are most relevant to our approach:

Security concerns have been the central driver of the North Korean ruling regime since the birth of the nation after World War II. ... The devastating Korean War, resolved only by an armistice, and the U.S. threat to use nuclear weapons likely moved Kim Il-sung to pursue nuclear weapons early on. ... The late 1960s were turbulent times in Pyongyang's relations with the West. South Korea's military was bolstered by U.S. troops and U.S. nuclear weapons on its soil. Pyongyang watched the Cuban missile crisis unfold in a manner that shed doubt on Soviet commitments to its allies. It witnessed the Sino-Soviet split and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Each of these developments reinforced the notion that Pyongyang could only rely on itself for the North's security. Although Pyongyang fielded an immense conventional army and its deadly artillery along the Demilitarized Zone (dmz) was poised to destroy Seoul, nuclear weapons would help to balance the U.S. nuclear presence in the South. ...

By the early 1990s, Pyongyang's security environment deteriorated dramatically. ... Pyongyang was devastated by these changes and began seriously to explore accommodation with the West, especially with the United States. [Carlin](#) and [Lewis](#) believe that Kim Il-sung made the strategic decision to engage the United States and even accept U.S. military presence in the South as a hedge against potentially hostile Chinese or Russian influence. ...

However, reconciliation between Washington and Pyongyang proved difficult, as Washington saw the [1994] Agreed Framework primarily as a nonproliferation agreement. ... the Agreed Framework was opposed immediately by many in Congress who believed that it rewarded bad behavior. Congress failed to appropriate funds for key provisions of the pact, causing the United States to fall behind in its commitments almost from the beginning. ... The Agreed Framework, which began as a process of interaction and cooperation, quickly turned into accusations of non-compliance by both parties. ...

the diplomatic crisis resulting from its 1998 rocket launch over Japan was resolved by the Perry Process ... The follow-up meeting between Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Kim Jong-il that was held in Pyongyang a couple of weeks later appeared to put the nuclear crisis on a path to final resolution.

With the change in administrations in Washington, hope for a settlement was quickly dashed. Whereas Pyongyang was waiting for a U.S. response to the Perry Process, it ran into the Bush administration's adamant opposition to the terms of the Agreed Framework and to political accommodation. Pyongyang practiced restraint with the incoming Bush administration until North Korea was accused of a covert uranium enrichment program and saw the Agreed Framework come to an end. During the confrontation over enrichment in October 2002, First Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kang Sok-ju told his American counterpart, "We are a part of the axis of evil. ... If we disarm ourselves because of U.S. pressure, then we will become like Yugoslavia or Afghanistan's Taliban, to be beaten to death." Pyongyang withdrew from the npt [Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty] and restarted its dormant Yongbyon facilities to produce fuel for a plutonium bomb.

Pyongyang's security fears were further heightened by the invasion of Iraq. Pyongyang now believed the bomb would assure its survival, so it no longer hid its nuclear weapons aspirations. ... Pyongyang views its security concerns as existential. ...

As undesirable as it may sound, the best hope is a long-term strategy to contain the nuclear threat while tackling the North Korean problem comprehensively, but in discrete steps. ... it is essential to stop Pyongyang from doing additional damage around the world through nuclear cooperation and exports. ...

The Bush administration killed the Agreed Framework for domestic political reasons and because it suspected Pyongyang of cheating by covertly pursuing uranium enrichment. Doing so traded a potential threat that would have taken years to turn into bombs for one that took months, dramatically changing the diplomatic landscape in Pyongyang's favor. ...

The United States plays an indispensable role in proliferation prevention, but it can't go it alone. It cannot afford to sit at the sidelines as it has done with Iran. We found that Pyongyang was willing to slow its drive for nuclear weapons only when it believed the fundamental relationship with the United States was improving, but not when the regime was threatened. ...

The more divided we are at home, the more we yield advantage to the adversary. Political divisions in Washington in recent years resulted in our inability to negotiate the nuclear crisis effectively. American diplomats lament that it has been more difficult to negotiate in Washington than at the six-party table.

Perhaps the best summary of the above situation is contained in a question that Prof. Hecker answered when he gave a guest lecture in this seminar early in 2010. At the end of his talk, one of the students asked, "Are you convinced that if the Bush administration hadn't broken the agreements with North Korea in 2002 and accused them [of cheating], then they wouldn't have a bomb now?" His unedited reply follows:

I think there's a good likelihood that what you just said is true. We still don't know that for sure because it's very hard to dig back into the early history of what they did with the reactor, when they operated that reactor, what they made. And the best analysis that we have is that prior to 1994, which is when they froze everything. [*MH Note: Between 1994 and 2002 they shut down their plutonium production under the Agreed Framework.*] In 1994, prior to that, they may have made two to ten kilograms of plutonium, as we look at the reactor, the operations. But we're not sure. It's also possible that actually they didn't even make two kilograms. And since we need about six for a bomb, it's quite possible that they never had a bomb. In 1993 to 1994, you go back, and the Director of Central Intelligence, actually one Bob Gates, said at that time that they believed that North Korea has the possibility of having one or two nuclear weapons. That was the intelligence community's judgment in 1993, 1994. As we look back today, we say that's the upper end, and it's possible that they had nothing.¹⁰

In that same guest lecture, Prof. Hecker made several key points:

- While North Korea is ruled by a despotic regime with horrible human rights abuses, its record of adherence to nuclear agreements is relatively good.
- We have failed to meet many of our obligations under those same agreements.
- American accusations of illicit uranium enrichment have some basis, but are not materially important. If a nation can master the plutonium bomb, as North Korea has done, enriching uranium is of secondary importance. [This is also applicable to understanding the implications of the North's uranium enrichment, revealed to Prof. Hecker during his Fall 2010 visit. Most media reports have exaggerated the importance. For Prof. Hecker's original statements, see my [November 22, 2010 blog post](#) on his trip report.]
- North Korea has been existentially threatened by the United States. They will not give up their crude nuclear deterrent under current conditions. But if we will return to the negotiating table and treat them with respect, Hecker believes it is possible to induce them to do no further nuclear testing. That is very important to our national security because their current nuclear weapons are crude and probably not missile-capable. More testing will be needed to achieve that goal, so stopping it is of the utmost importance. Unfortunately, American domestic politics makes such an approach impossible.

¹⁰ Even plutonium for one or two bombs would have been a minimal threat since two tests were needed for North Korea to achieve a reasonable yield.

- Contrary to the popular view that negotiations with the North are a waste of time, we have obtained much more through diplomacy than North Korea has. Under the 1994 Agreed Framework, they stopped construction of two large nuclear reactors. Without the Agreed Framework, Hecker estimates that North Korea would now have enough plutonium for 100 bombs, instead of the 4-8 that they have. As noted in the question and answer above, there is even a “good likelihood” that the North would have no bombs today if we had not taken the actions that we did in 2002.

Two Differing Perspectives: A [2008 report](#) by by Stanford Professors John Lewis and Robert Carlin notes that, like two of the blind men with the elephant, the U.S. and North Korea view the 1994 Agreed Framework from totally different perspectives:

One of the most serious, pernicious misunderstandings of the Agreed Framework [under which the United States and North Korea were defusing tension over North Korea’s nuclear program] is that it was, at heart, a nonproliferation agreement. It was not. The engine of the framework was always its political provisions (section II). These called for both sides to “move toward full normalization of political and economic relations” ...

By treating North Korea so exclusively through its own lens, as a nonproliferation concern, the United States ignored Pyongyang’s strategic concerns and the domestic priorities that drove much of its external actions. Not surprisingly, this problem persisted and was magnified after 2001. In a telling moment a few years ago with the authors, an exasperated North Korean official repeated a point he had often made in the past:

You don’t deal with us directly or as an equal or even as a negotiating partner. ... This is intolerable. This means you don’t understand even Asian culture, where prestige and face are so important. Your government really doesn’t have any respect for us, so why should we respect you? This is what I meant earlier when I said you deal only with trivial matters and not with the basic relationship. We wanted to have a fundamental relationship with you, but you didn’t want that.

Impact of NATO Attack on Libya: NATO’s attack on Libya and the resultant fall of Muammar Gaddafi will make it much harder to get North Korea to give up its nuclear deterrent. In December 2003, Gaddafi gave up his nuclear weapons program in the belief that it would protect him from the kind of regime change that had just occurred in Iraq. NATO’s attack has made an indelible impression on North Korea, with its Central News Agency claiming:

It was fully exposed before the world that “Libya’s nuclear dismantlement” much touted by the U.S. in the past turned out to be a mode of aggression whereby the latter coaxed the former with such sweet words as “guarantee of security” and “improvement of relations” to disarm itself and then swallowed it up by force

This is not to say that the attack on Libya was wrong, merely that its impact on nuclear proliferation received far too little, if any, consideration – a clear lack of critical thinking.

North Korean Provocations: Two additional incidents deserve critical reexamination because South Korea and the United States have stated that there is little point in reopening negotiations with the North about its nuclear program until it is willing to apologize for these provocative incidents. As we shall see, these incidents are more complex than usually allowed, and there is even a possibility that North Korea played no part in one of them. The prevailing view in the U.S. is summarized in a [recent article](#) that goes on to advocate development of a nuclear weapon that could kill North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il if he hid in one of that nation's deep underground bunkers:¹¹

In the past 18 months, North Korea sank a South Korean warship, the *Cheonan*, and bombarded Yeonpyeong Island in South Korea. Together, these two attacks killed 50 South Koreans. Moreover, it seems like further provocations might be on the way. These brazen acts threaten the credibility of US security commitments in Northeast Asia.

On the surface, the basis for the above argument – that North Korea brazenly attacked without provocation, twice no less – has significant evidence in its favor:

- An [international investigation](#) into the sinking of the *Cheonan* reached “the clear conclusion that ROKS *Cheonan* was sunk as the result of an external underwater explosion caused by a torpedo made in North Korea. The evidence points overwhelmingly to the conclusion that the torpedo was fired by a North Korean submarine. There is no other plausible explanation.”
- Yeonpyeong Island was recognized as South Korean territory by the armistice ending the Korean War.

But digging a bit deeper finds a more nuanced situation. First considering the sinking of the *Cheonan*, this incident occurred in disputed waters, near the Northern Limit Line. The NLL is not, as often portrayed in the mainstream media, an internationally recognized boundary between North and South Korea waters. Rather, it was drawn by the United States at the end of the Korean War, and is disputed by the North. The *Cheonan* was not the first vessel lost in these disputed waters: in a 2009 exchange of fire, a North Korean vessel was set ablaze near the NLL; in a 2002 exchange of fire, a South Korean ship was sunk near the NLL; and in a 1999 naval encounter, two North Korean vessels were sunk near the NLL. The previous South Korean President had reached an agreement with Kim Jong Il to help prevent further such losses, but that was repudiated when the current President Lee assumed office in 2008. Former CNN foreign

¹¹ One of the authors rebuts critiques of this article in [a blog post](#).

correspondent and now USC Senior Fellow Mike Chinoy [argued in Forbes](#) magazine that these hard-line policies of South Korea's president played a pivotal role in the *Cheonan* incident:

it is not surprising that many view the sinking of the *Cheonan* as just the latest example of outrageous North Korean behavior. The incident does mark a significant escalation in an always dangerous situation. But lost in the often breathless media coverage is a critical fact – the attack did not occur in a vacuum. Indeed, in crucial ways, it is the entirely predictable outcome of an abrupt shift in North-South relations – produced not by the actions of Kim Jong Il, but by the policies of President Lee Myung-bak's administration in Seoul. ... The conservative Lee had campaigned pledging a tougher line toward North Korea, and upon taking office in early 2008, he and his advisers quickly made clear they did not intend to honor the agreement reached by [the previous, more moderate South Korean president] Roh and Kim Jong Il [to avoid naval clashes near the NLL]. ... However understandable the frustration with what he viewed as excessive concessions to Pyongyang made by his liberal predecessors, it is clear that President Lee's efforts to rewrite the rules of the North-South relationship unilaterally marked the starting point of a new cycle of escalation that led to the sinking of the *Cheonan*.

The [allegedly unanimous](#) conclusion of the international investigation also has been questioned. First, it came to light that a dissenting member of the investigation committee had been removed at the request of the South Korean Defense Ministry. He published an online, [open letter](#)¹² to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, arguing that the evidence pointed to an accidental grounding of the *Cheonan*, followed by a collision with another vessel that caused the *Cheonan* to break in two. Shin's letter claims:

- The first distress call from the *Cheonan* was that it had run aground.
- A chart initially used by the Navy to show victims' families what happened showed where the *Cheonan* had run aground.
- Damage to the hull indicates grounding, not a torpedo attack.
- The propellers are bent in a way that proves they were in "full engine astern" while hitting the bottom, again consistent with grounding but inconsistent with a torpedo attack.

¹² When I first came across Shin's letter, I was suspicious and waited until I had further evidence that it was authentic and that Shin had been a member of the investigative committee. [Confirmation](#) came when a major South Korean newspaper, *The JoongAng Daily*, confirmed his position on the commission and other key elements of his story. That confirming article added a new accusation by Shin: photographs show that the alleged North Korean markings on the recovered torpedo parts were written on the rusted surface, not on the original smooth surface, and hence are faked. Both Shin's letter and this article also allege that the South Korean Navy is taking legal action to silence him.

South Korea's Ministry of National Defense published an online rebuttal that is no longer available on their site, but that is repeated in full in one of my [blog posts](#). It presents no concrete evidence to refute Shin's accusations listed above, and merely repeats the conclusions of the committee.

My colleague and Asian expert, Prof. John Lewis, also pointed out that a key piece of evidence cited by the committee was clearly wrong. The committee supported its conclusion of a torpedo attack with "conclusive evidence" that compared torpedo parts allegedly found by the South Korean navy in the vicinity of the incident with a drawing of a torpedo in a North Korean export brochure. While to my untrained eye, the two looked similar, as a former naval officer, Lewis recognized major differences and sent me a figure showing the differences. That figure with more explanation is on [another blog post](#). South Korea later confirmed Lewis' claim, with a South Korean news agency [stating](#):

South Korea's military investigators admitted Tuesday they had "mistakenly" shown the wrong blueprint of the type of North Korean torpedo they said sank a South Korean warship ... The investigators called the incident a "mistake by a working-level staff."

Turning to North Korea's November 2010 shelling of Yeonpyeong Island that killed four South Koreans, at a Stanford seminar soon after the incident, Prof. Lewis claimed:

- South Korea started the artillery exchange. While it claims it fired away from North Korean territory, any military action in this disputed region carries grave risks of escalation. (Yeonpyeong Island is only 7.5 miles from the North Korean coast.)
- All three hotlines between Seoul and Pyongyang were down at the time of South Korea's shelling. North Korea therefore used commercial communications to ask the South: "Are we under attack?" It received no answer in the two hours that elapsed before (from its perspective) it returned the artillery fire.
- The commander of the South Korean Marines vowed "thousand-fold" retaliation for the deaths on Yeonpyeong Island. Prof. Lewis later pointed me to a [report](#) by South Korea's publicly funded news agency (Yonhap) that claimed the North suffered "severe human casualties" when South Korea shelled a North Korean barracks in retaliation for the North's shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. American media tend not to report this.

Caveats Repeated: Please remember that the above information emphasizes perspectives contrary to those portrayed in the mainstream media and accepted by most Americans. Neither perspective shows the whole picture, but taken together, they provide a more complete view. Also, just like the mainstream reports, the contrarian information is subject to error. Critical thinking applies to both sides of the issue!