The Leap Day Agreement: An Analysis of the Obama Administration’s Decision to Engage with North Korea

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SISU-230-003: Analysis of U.S. Foreign Policy

November 21, 2017

North Korea’s nuclear proliferation has been a threat since the 1960s and has been a leading foreign policy concern in the post-Cold War era. Today, it is being described as one of the biggest national security threats to the United States, and a policy of “maximum pressure and engagement” is being employed today.[[1]](#footnote-1) American presidents have each had their own world views and strategies for dealing with the North Korean nuclear threat. Former President Barack Obama’s policy towards North Korea was one of “strategic patience;” that is, the United States would maintain its sanctions regime and wait patiently for North Korea to change its strategic calculus and threat perception.[[2]](#footnote-2) Obama came into office after the Six-Party Talks that were initiated in August 2003 between China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States disintegrated due to verification disagreements and a condemned North Korean rocket launch. The following years consisted of North Korea repeatedly engaging in provocative and prohibited nuclear-related activities and the international community responding in part by implementing stricter sanctions. In December 2011, North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il died and was succeeded by his son, Kim Jong-Un. After just a couple months of Kim Jong-Un’s reign, the United States and North Korea announced the Leap Day Agreement, which was the result of bilateral negotiations held in Beijing, China.[[3]](#footnote-3)

This research paper intends to analyze the reasons why the Obama Administration decided to participate in these discussions with North Korea in Beijing from February 23-24, 2012. As a result of the meeting, both countries announced that an agreement had been met under which North Korea would suspend operations at its Yongbyon uranium enrichment plant, allow IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency) inspectors to monitor the suspension, and implement moratoriums on nuclear and long-range nuclear tests. In return, the United States agreed to provide North Korea with 240,000 metric tons of food aid.[[4]](#footnote-4) The announcements, which were released on February 29, 2012, were in fact the result of bilateral talks since summer 2011. Kim Jong Il had died on December 17, 2011, and the United States was not sure if North Korea’s new leader, Kim Jong Un, would agree to the previously discussed terms of agreement.[[5]](#footnote-5) It is extremely relevant and important to analyze why the Leap Day Agreement failed in order to evaluate what criteria needs to be met in order for future agreements to last and to avoid the repetition of history. An analysis of this foreign policy decision by the Obama Administration is especially pertinent now that North Korea has developed a thermonuclear weapon, which is significantly more difficult to make and smaller than a gun-type fission weapon, meaning it can be used on an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).[[6]](#footnote-6) Furthermore, North Korea’s nuclear weapons program is more developed than previously thought, and negotiating a long-lasting agreement with North Korea is vital to mitigate the threat of nuclear weapons.

Although there were technically a wide array of policy options for the Obama Administration to pursue, the main determining factor was whether or not to continue with the policy set forth by George W. Bush. Bush had cut off communication with North Korea after the Six-Party Talks ended over major differences on the issue of verification measures, and the Obama Administration had to decide whether to continue this policy of silence or to try and engage with North Korea once again. The Obama Campaign had been critical of the Bush Administration by saying that the decision to cut off talks with North Korea had been a wrong one; since the United States cut off talks, North Korea had gone and quadrupled its nuclear capacity. Ignoring the problem, in the eyes of the upcoming Obama Administration, was no longer the viable policy decision. Despite these critiques of the Bush Administration, however, the Obama Administration’s policy of strategic patience largely emulated the silence it had so firmly taken a stance against.[[7]](#footnote-7) The only exception to this policy was the Leap Day Agreement, which served as a modest attempt to engage with North Korea.

The first two reasons why the Obama Administration chose to engage in negotiations with North Korea can be analyzed through the foreign policy tool of global and historical environment. This context centers on: the past relationship between the United States and North Korea regarding nuclear development and the malnourishment of the North Korean population. The history of nuclear diplomacy dates back to 1985, when North Korea agreed to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since then, efforts of negotiating with North Korea over its nuclear and missile programs have been marked by periods of crisis, stalemate, and tentative progress towards denuclearization. One major trend, however, prevailed; some sort of accord would be met only to be unraveled shortly after its agreement.[[8]](#footnote-8) As a result of this tumultuous history, the Obama Administration approached the talks with North Korea with an equal amount of pragmatism and skepticism. The Obama Administration did not want to repeat history and “buy the same horse twice” by negotiating an agreement only for North Korea to abandon it. Furthermore, the Obama Administration doubted North Korea’s credibility as a negotiating partner; the Leap Day Agreement was being used as a test of North Korea’s seriousness and willingness to follow through on its commitments.[[9]](#footnote-9) Especially since Kim Jong-Un had just acceded power, the Obama Administration wanted to see how diplomatic efforts would play out with him in comparison to his father.[[10]](#footnote-10) The United States therefore used its history of nuclear and missile-related negotiations with North Korea as an indication of how to approach the bilateral discussions in Beijing.

The second factor of the global and historical environment, the malnourishment of North Koreans, became notable in the 1990s when Kim Jong Il drove his country into a famine that killed approximately one million people. When the United States and North Korea began negotiations for the Leap Day Agreement in the summer of 2011, Kim Jong Il was faced with new food shortages due to poor harvests, bad weather, and the effects of sanctions. The United Nations reported that over six million North Koreans urgently needed food aid, and U.S. experts allowed to examine the situation in North Korea found “deep, chronic malnutrition” across the country. As a result, the United States began exploring options for aid programs to North Korea as it had done in the past. These humanitarian discussions then led to nuclear-related discussions, and despite Kim Jong Il’s death and the shift of power to Kim Jong Un, the negotiations continued unaffected. Back and forth signaling ensued until an agreement was met under which North Korea would suspend major parts of its nuclear program in return for food aid from the United States.[[11]](#footnote-11) Moreover, the history of malnourishment in North Korea affected the nature of U.S. diplomatic efforts with the country and played an integral role in the negotiations process.

The third reason why the Obama Administration chose to engage in negotiations with North Korea can be analyzed through the foreign policy tool of presidential leadership style and personality. Obama’s personality has been described as cautious and analytical. During his presidency, his legal background allowed him to find flaws in policies and use considerable foresight, but on several occasions he would wait for optimal, often improbable conditions before making concrete foreign policy decisions. His hesitance came off as indecisive at many times, and a credibility gap developed between his words and his deeds; he did not always follow through on the assertive statements he made.[[12]](#footnote-12) This analysis of Obama’s personality and leadership style is reflected in his policy towards North Korea. As mentioned before, the Obama Administration’s policy towards North Korea was one of strategic patience. This relied upon the premise that North Korea’s continued provocations would lead to damaging self-isolation and that active engagement with North Korea would be both risky and unfruitful. The policy of strategic patience further suggested that the United States could afford to wait for North Korea to make its own decision to denuclearize. This was the belief held by the Obama Administration until it was discovered that North Korea was making progress with its uranium enrichment and light water reactor, after which the Administration decided to pursue the bilateral negotiations with North Korea leading to the Leap Day Agreement.[[13]](#footnote-13) This policy of strategic patience with an openness to dialogue is emblematic of Obama’s hesitant and analytic mind. He did not want to engage with North Korea until it signaled that it was ready for denuclearization to some extent and he thought that North Korea’s provocations did not necessarily warrant swift reaction.

As can be seen through this analysis, the Obama Administration made the decision to engage in the bilateral discussions leading to the Leap Day Agreement due to a variety of factors. Three of these factors include: the history of U.S.-North Korean nuclear diplomacy, the malnourishment of North Korea’s population, and President Barack Obama’s personality and leadership style. Furthermore, it depicts the decision-making in regards to the Leap Day Agreement as heavily entrenched in historical context and Obama’s analytical mindset. The Obama Administration did not want to repeat history and pursue talks for the sake of pursuing talks. It wanted to engage with North Korea in a way that was conducive to concrete denuclearization while providing North Koreans with food aid and test whether North Korea was willing to stick to its commitments. The Leap Day Agreement, in theory, was going to allow the Obama Administration to do just that.

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