Threat Consensus and Rapprochement Failure: Revisiting the Collapse of US–North Korea Relations, 1994–2002

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Why do states that make a deliberate effort to pursue rapprochement sometimes fail? This article dissects US–North Korea relations between 1994 and 2002 as one way to better understand how deliberate decisions to dramatically improve relations with a historical adversary go awry. This vastly understudied period in US–North Korea relations started in late 1994 with an ambitious agreement to move toward diplomatic normalization through a gradual process based on reciprocal “action for action,” abruptly ending in 2002 with mutual acrimony and the resumption of long-standing hostility. Why did reciprocity strategies by both sides in the intervening period fail to deliver the promised relational change?

The seemingly obvious explanation—a lack of consensus among US policy elites about North Korea policy—does not fit with what actually happened. Moreover, theories of rapprochement that might have anticipated success in the US–North Korea case cannot readily explain why rapprochement failed without resorting to situation-specific factors, which undermines their explanatory power. At the same time, theories of rapprochement that would have correctly predicted failure, on the basis of identity incompatibility or other unfavorable conditions, offer an incomplete account of events. Such rapprochement pessimists struggle to explain why the United States would seek rapprochement with North Korea if the prospects of success were so predictably dim, why the Clinton administration would settle on the rapprochement approach it did, and why it would simultaneously pursue rapprochement while publicly promoting North Korea as a threat.

This article shows how the strength and character of political discourse about an adversary can constitute a condition that favors maintaining rigid adversarial perceptions and policies, sabotaging attempts at rapprochement in at least three specific ways: by constraining the policy options available to decision makers who pursue rapprochement, by encouraging the pursuit of major security challenges with only minor accommodative means, and by imposing interpretive frames that bias perceptions of adversary behavior in the context of rapprochement. Each of these makes a rapprochement process delicate and prone to reversion to hostility.

By analyzing the process that led to rapprochement failure, I find the presence and conditioning effects of a bipartisan “threat consensus” among US policy elites—that is, a shared perception and intersubjectively held understanding among elites of the threat that North Korea posed. This explanation does not contradict but rather subsumes cognitive theories of decision making as an...
approach to explaining rapprochement failure. In the US–North Korea case, “hawk” and “dove” biases did exist in the distribution of US policymaker perspectives, but these preferences existed within the confines of a common discourse that North Korea was a threat that could not to be trusted. The threat consensus likewise subsumes a bureaucratic politics approach to understanding rapprochement failure partly because bureaucratic preferences co-constitute prevailing elite discourses. As the case analysis below suggests, moreover, the distribution of bureaucratic preferences within the US government did not vary across the observed time period even though the policy approach to North Korea did. Thus, while bureaucratic perspectives and jockeying contributed to the observed outcome in this case, it provides an incomplete explanation of how that outcome came about.

Given the obvious “core-periphery” divide between the United States and North Korea with regard to producing and contesting legitimate means of security, this case may seem ripe for a critical approach such as Marxism or dependency theory (Cardozo and Faletto 1979). While the case does feature the preferences of a core state attempting to impose constraints on a peripheral state, such a narrative risks distracting more than it illuminates. Clinton administration officials reified the threat consensus even as they attempted to pivot away from an entrenched US–North Korea hostility that dated back to the Korean War. In so doing, however, they dramatically constrained the range of strategies possible for dealing with North Korea and locked themselves into an inherently precarious process that had a high likelihood of failure. These aspects of the case would be lost in a narrative that emphasizes security inequality. Such a critical approach also struggles to account for why the United States would enter into a rapprochement process if it were destined to fail on historical materialist grounds. This case thus has explanatory holes that critical approaches may be less apt to fill than would a threat consensus approach, described more below.

This article proceeds in four parts. The first part introduces the rapprochement literature by way of the puzzle at the center of this article, a description of how consensus discourses can act as structures that “shape and shove” foreign policy behavior, and an explanation of how a threat consensus impinges on rapprochement processes per se. The second part provides a narrative of the case, starting with the Agreed Framework and culminating in the unambiguous collapse of relations in October 2002. The third part highlights evidence of a bipartisan threat consensus that existed among US policymakers during the attempted rapprochement period and illustrates how it not only constrained the range of possible options for pursuing rapprochement but also biased perceptions of North Korean behavior in a way that made the rapprochement process inherently fragile. The final part reflects on what the presence of the threat consensus in this case suggests for the theory and practice of rapprochement.

**Rapprochement and the Threat Consensus**

As used here, the term “rapprochement” describes a relationship characterized by shared expectations of peaceful coexistence in which direct security competition has been suspended; when rapprochement obtains, the states involved have decided that armed violence is no longer an appropriate method of competition or dispute resolution (Rock 1989, 5). It can be understood as both a state of relations and a process that aims to move toward that state.

Because some US officials expected North Korea to collapse, thereby alleviating its promises for concessions and normalization, it might be argued that this is not a case of rapprochement. But collapse speculation is unproblematic for three reasons. First, rapprochement processes need not proceed on the basis of

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1Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
sincerity; case coding should be a matter of observing characteristics of rapprochement involving conciliatory bargaining and accommodation in the direction of peaceable relations. Second, while some did see North Korean collapse as inevitable, recently declassified evidence reveals that the view was not unanimous (US Department of State 1996a), and those who did expect North Korean collapse did not see it as imminent but rather as a much longer term prospect (Central Intelligence Agency 1998). This suggests that notions of collapse should not prevent this case from being coded as rapprochement failure, especially considering that other rapprochement studies (Rock 2000) already do so. Third, internal State Department communications reveal that once the Clinton administration began the process of rapprochement, it took steps to bolster North Korea against the possibility of collapse: “As the North Korean economy has deteriorated, we and the ROK [Republic of Korea] have also cooperated to prevent the precipitate collapse of the DPRK [Democratic People’s Republic of Korea]...” (US Department of State 1996b). If the Clinton administration intended to simply wait out its peacemaking promises to avoid fulfilling them, keeping North Korea afloat would seem a strange decision.

The Rapprochement and Reconciliation Process

The failure of US–North Korea rapprochement is consistent with some, but not all, expectations in the rivalries, reconciliation, and peacebuilding literatures in which studies of rapprochement are often situated. Stephen Rock’s (1989) work examining great power rapprochement posits that complementary (as opposed to identical) economies and geopolitical interests are strong facilitating conditions for rapprochement while similar political and ideological orientations are necessary conditions for rapprochement to obtain. Charles Kupchan (2010) identifies rapprochement as the most nascent stage on a three-stage continuum of stable peace—rapprochement, security community, and union (30). All three types demonstrate varying levels of cooperation, interconnectedness, and shared identity. For Kupchan (2010), rapprochement entails a “move away from armed rivalry...The parties in question...come to see each other as benign polities” (30), but neither seek nor have explicit behavioral rules or norms; nor do parties in a state of rapprochement share an identity. Facilitating conditions include institutionalized restraint, cultural commonality, and compatible social orders (Kupchan 2010).

Taking a more instrumental approach to how rapprochement obtains, Charles Osgood’s (1962) Graduated and Reciprocated Initiative in Tension-Reduction (GRIT) explains how dyadic relationships can transform from enmity to amity through reciprocal acts of security-relevant accommodation, starting with some grand gesture or statement that reveals benign intent. In articulating a pathway to stable peace, Kenneth Boulding (1978, 113) also seized on the GRIT strategy as a means of “producing a dynamic of adjusting national images until the images become compatible.” The key distinguishing assumption in this neofunctionalist approach compared with that of Rock and Kupchan is that identity and geopolitical differences will adjust based on instrumental behaviors that rationally reveal mutually benign intentions.

The varied literature relating to acts of unilateral accommodation also finds common cause with the GRIT strategy. In a later work, Rock (2000) examines the conditions under which appeasement can be a successful approach in international relations, finding it most likely to be effective when the target of appeasement is a status quo state, rather than a greed-motivated or revisionist state. Numerous other studies have also shown the effectiveness of unilateral acts of accommodation, finding variously that: positive incentives/concessions can induce short-term desirable behavior and potentially have long-term catalytic effects...
(Nincic 2006); one state’s symbolic recognition of another’s self-image can serve as a major constraint on war (Lindemann 2011); and unilateral acts of apology or contrition constitute necessary conditions for international reconciliation (Berger 2003; Lebow 2004). A separate but related literature identifies exogenous shocks or critical junctures as a necessary catalyst of fundamental foreign policy changes but often fails to explain how that change occurs (Golob 2003; Legro 2005; Dicicco 2011; Jackson 2011). What binds these diverse literatures is an expectation that conflicting identities and interests are not necessarily impediments to dramatic shifts from security competition to peaceful coexistence.

The above perspectives on rapprochement point to some factors that improve understanding aspects of the case, but each faces problems accounting for how the United States opted for rapprochement with North Korea—and why that strategy ultimately collapsed. Rational approaches, such as the GRIT method and the literature calling for acts of unilateral accommodation, suggest the highest hopes for rapprochement between adversaries with conflicting interests and identities and offer a reconciliation playbook that hews closely to how US–North Korea cooperation started. But evidence in this case proves a poor explanatory fit. The rapprochement process, initiated with the 1994 Agreed Framework, saw the United States offering considerable concessions of both a material (energy and food assistance) and symbolic (the promise of normalization and mutual recognition as equals) nature that were largely consonant with that called for by GRIT and unilateral accommodation theories of rapprochement. What is more, Rock’s (2000) work on appeasement uses US–North Korea relations following the Agreed Framework as a crucial case of success in support of his claims. Written approximately two years before US–North Korea relations fell apart, Rock (2000) assessed this as a case of rapprochement success, catalyzed by appeasement, as called for in the literature. Because the dyadic rapprochement ultimately failed despite meeting the conditions for anticipated success, these events prove a deviant case.

But not all theories of rapprochement harbored optimism about a dyad like the United States and North Korea. Rock’s 1989 approach to explaining rapprochement, as distinct from his later work on appeasement, might easily expect that US–North Korea rapprochement would end in failure given their incompatible ideologies and conflicting geopolitical goals. Kupchan’s theory of rapprochement would similarly find success highly unlikely because of the absence of important facilitating conditions—institutionalized restraint, cultural commonality, and compatible social orders. Yet there are limits to what these conditions can tell us about this case because in practice they do not impose themselves much on events. Ideological, political, and cultural incompatibility constitute factors that color the context of US–North Korea relations in a general sense, but they do not tell us why the Clinton administration would pursue rapprochement if their geopolitical goals were as obviously contradictory with North Korea as they were or why the Clinton administration settled on what proved to be a fragile rapprochement process, contingent on “simultaneous action” and reciprocity. As discussed below, because the Clinton administration pursued North Korea policy to the exclusion of opposition Republicans in Congress—who tended to have more hawkish policy preferences—it is difficult to claim that the gradualist Clinton approach to North Korea was some kind of political compromise to take into account opposition Republican preferences. More puzzling still is why Clinton officials would not only fail to resist but actively reify the public narrative about North Korea constituting a untrustworthy threat to US security interests, especially if they believed a more cooperative and diplomatic approach to North Korea would yield desirable outcomes. These aspects of the case are not easily explained with simple reference to identity or strategic conflicts with North Korea.
Constructing a Threat Consensus

At the intersection of ideas and foreign policy (Goldstein and Keohane 1993; Yee 1996; Legro 2005; Haas 2005;), a strain of research concentrates on ideational consensus among elites. This consensus refers to collectively held ideas that have become a relatively “fixed” part of the policy landscape as ideas become embedded in institutions, intersubjectively understood identities, and discourse among policy elites (Berman 2001). Such consensuses affect policy outcomes by constraining or otherwise shaping the range and adoptability of policy options available to elites. Once an ideational consensus forms, it is by definition represented in the preferences and discourses of even opposing elite power centers (Berman 2001, 237)—for example, in both Democrat and Republican positions. While not inherently fixed or static, its cross-partisan nature makes it difficult to dislodge, and its existence defines boundaries for, and sometimes logically prescribes, potential policies. Because it is not a predictive variable but rather an explanatory structural condition, identification of an ideational consensus lends itself to answering certain types of questions better than others. Evelyn Goh (2005), for instance, problematized the Sino–US rapprochement process to account for the timing of China’s famed “opening” by President Nixon in the 1970s. The internal US discourse about the nature of China in the 1950s and 1960s prevented US officials interested in diplomatic warming with China from pursuing such a policy; only when the US elite consensus about China moved away from an image of “red menace” and toward one of a “tacit ally” could US policymakers (Nixon) reach for a policy of rapprochement (Goh 2005). “Only Nixon can travel to China” has become a common turn of phrase, but Goh notes that even Nixon could not have pursued a successful rapprochement policy with China twenty or even ten years earlier because the prevailing US discourse put it out of the realm of the possible.

Note how this explanation does not replace geopolitical considerations and the United States’ need to balance the Soviet Union—a popular explanation for Sino–US rapprochement. It simply points out that power balancing does not lend itself to answering the questions of why Nixon’s predecessors failed to pursue rapprochement, why Nixon could, and why he did when he did. Goh’s discursive approach thus fills nontrivial explanatory holes. Van Jackson (2011) similarly leverages ideational consensus to show that diplomatic normalization between Japan and South Korea took place in 1965 and not in the twenty years prior because South Korean elite discourse did not begin to accommodate the possibility of diplomatic normalization with Japan until the early 1960s. US pressure, economic incentives, and geopolitical interests had all favored Japan–South Korea normalization dating back to the early 1950s, but none of these factors were sufficient until key South Korean elites began arguing that normalization was desirable and in the South Korean interest.

Early constructivist-oriented research also showed the shaping power of ideational consensus on policy in economic and institutional contexts (McNamara 1998; Blyth 2002; Parsons 2002; Checkel 2005), which Andrew Yeo (2011) has extended to elite decision making about hosting US military bases.

As used here, a threat consensus operates in the same conceptual space as that identified above: it is ideational; it is intersubjectively held; it can be observed in written and oral discourses; and it serves as a structure that “shapes and shoves” decision making. The threat consensus, in other words, is a consensus whose content is specifically about the threat that another state poses. Its relationship to observable outcomes is as a contextual intervention, conditioning a specific type of policy approach (rapprochement) in a certain way (failure or fragility). And like Goh (2005), Jackson (2011), and Yeo (2011), it does not supplant existing explanations of an event but helps fill explanatory holes about it.
When a threat consensus is present among a polity’s elites, we should find a high degree of agreement across elite national actors about the threat posed by another and should expect to see little contestation in the discourse characterizing the threat. In the presence of a threat consensus, certain types of policies and approaches to the identified threat make more sense than others; it represents a condition that makes some policies politically easier to pursue and some harder. Any policy, for example, that renders a country vulnerable to the specified threat is likely to exist outside the boundaries of reasonable policy discourse. Rapprochement policies are therefore not a priori incompatible with a threat consensus, as long as elites favoring rapprochement can justify why it is preferable to alternative policies. Nevertheless, a threat consensus puts rapprochement success at risk in at least three ways.

First, it imposes constraints on how rapprochement is pursued. Trust-building measures or signals of benign intent between adversaries, if they occur at all, are likely to constitute small hops of wariness rather than giant leaps of faith; that is, any accommodation of the other state’s security concerns is only feasible insofar as it does not require compromising one’s own security by rendering one’s country too vulnerable. This is problematic for rapprochement success because it is giant leaps of unilateral accommodation that represent the most credible signals of benign intent. Extreme policies may even be unimaginable or taboo to raise under the constraints of a threat consensus.

Second, undertaking a rapprochement process with a unanimously designated threat logically demands that the sources of threat emanating from the other state (for example, occupied territory, nuclear weapons, and offensive military doctrine) are at least in principle being addressed by the rapprochement process. Elites advocating rapprochement must have some theory in mind—and give voice to it—for how rapprochement improves their state’s situation vis-à-vis the designated threat. If not, they are unlikely to find any meaningful domestic backing for rapprochement. This poses a dilemma for the rapprochement process because core security challenges can be the most difficult to resolve. If rapprochement only involved small actions, with small risks and small payoffs, then it would be inadequate to the task of responding to a threat consensus. But policies with big payoffs—that is, policies that address the core security challenge(s)—do not logically fit with a rapprochement process likely to emphasize the small. Thus, rapprochement processes in the presence of a threat consensus are likely to reflect a mismatch between big ends (addressing the core security challenge) and meager means (small or limited accommodations of the threat’s security concerns).

Third, to the extent that a specific discourse serves as a heuristic or interpretive frame that favors assigning common meaning to actions observed in the world, a threat consensus represents a specific kind of interpretive bias when observing adversary behavior. It assumes that states do not undertake purely objective Bayesian updating processes of learning when exposed to new information and instead filter it through popular discursive guideposts; in this way, the threat consensus biases how a state pursuing rapprochement imputes an adversary’s intentions. When a threat consensus obtains, if an adversary’s word and deed can reasonably be construed as a signal of malign intent or untrustworthiness, it is likely that it will because the threat consensus permits a cognitive frame leading those inclined to interpret an adversary’s actions as threatening to parse reality in a way that discounts rapprochement initiatives and instead focuses on discrete activities that are congruent with historical adversarial perceptions and accordant policies.2

2This happens because discourses serve as “scripts” that individuals follow, whether for reasons of identity, instrumental convenience, or cognitive simplicity. See, for example, Geertz 1973; Tversky and Kahneman 1982; Tishkov 1997.

3Ole Holsti (1967) describes this as an inherent bad faith model (42–44, 48–52).
The practical implication is to set an implausibly high standard for sustaining the rapprochement process. As each side implements gradual measures to move down the path toward peaceful relations, the threat consensus not only lends a kind of moral superiority to arguments of elites who oppose rapprochement but also “stacks the deck” against continuing a rapprochement process, favoring those who oppose it. Given that conditions of incomplete information pervade international relations, it is easy to impute an adversary’s behavior with malign intentions and difficult for an adversary to communicate credible signals of benign intent (Jervis 1970). The presence of a threat consensus makes it even more so; elites opposed to rapprochement can draw on the threat consensus to rationalize observed adversary actions as violating the terms of engagement or enhancing the threat already posed. At a minimum, this helps justify suspending or slowing implementation of one’s own commitment to the process and potentially a rollback of rapprochement policy altogether.

None of these constraints under a threat consensus deterministically doom attempts at rapprochement, but they do “shape and shove” the process in a way that makes it fragile—by pursuing it conservatively, setting a high threshold for success incommensurate with the means employed to achieve it, and perpetuating an interpretive frame that empowers those with antirapprochement preferences. The US–North Korea case illustrates the plausibility of this claim.

From Crisis to Cooperation: 1994–2002

In October 1994, America’s pivot toward rapprochement with North Korea began in earnest with an unprecedented agreement in both symbolism and substance—the Agreed Framework. This landmark agreement in US–North Korea relations represented a step for both nations away from a conflict over North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. Starting with the Agreed Framework, each side undertook a series of initiatives over the eight years to follow that were designed to walk both states back from confrontation by eliminating the major points of tension in the relationship. These initiatives, described below, were undercut by a persistent threat consensus made all too evident in public statements by various parts of the US government. For most of 1994–2002, the division of power between the Clinton administration and Congress exacerbated the challenge of rapprochement, partly because the Agreed Framework was an executive branch initiative that was pursued without buy-in from Congress and partly because the US divided system of government provided enough transparency in its views of North Korea as a threat to undermine its own rapprochement initiatives.

The Agreed Framework called for several measures, including the normalization of economic and political relations, formal assurances from the United States that it would not threaten or use nuclear weapons against North Korea, a continuation of reconciliation dialogue between North and South Korea, and a pledge for North Korea to fulfill the 1992 South–North denuclearization agreement, which forswore both Koreas from possessing nuclear processing or enrichment facilities. These relationship-transforming initiatives accompanied North Korean agreement to freeze all nuclear activity and allow International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors to monitor the freeze in exchange for the United States to lead an effort to provide North Korea with two “proliferation-resistant” light water reactors (LWRs) and regular shipments of heavy fuel oil to compensate North Korea for the energy it agreed to forego by freezing its nuclear pursuits.

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4See also Sigal (1998) and Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci (2004).
5Lead US negotiator of the Agreed Framework, Robert Gallucci, pictured the Agreed Framework as “a set of steps that one side takes and the other side takes. It’s reciprocal, sometimes in parallel.” See Arms Control Association (2002).
The remainder of this section briefly describes the sequence of relevant events driving relations through the end of 2002 when talks broke down into mutual recriminations.

**KEDO and the Missile Talks**

In accordance with the terms of the Agreed Framework, the United States and North Korea agreed on January 20, 1995, to terms for the safe storage of spent nuclear fuel. This was followed by the June 13, 1995, Joint US–DPRK Press Statement from Kuala Lumpur that established the Korean Energy Development Organization (KEDO), a US-led, multinational consortium designed to construct for North Korea the LWRs promised in the Agreed Framework. Although the United States led KEDO, its funds came largely from South Korea, Japan, and international donors. In addition to lobbying for KEDO funding from other states, the United States was responsible, per the terms of the Agreed Framework, for supplying regular shipments of heavy fuel oil to North Korea as compensation for the energy it lost by suspending activity at its previously active nuclear reactors; the US-provided heavy fuel oil shipments were to continue until the KEDO LWRs were constructed.

In April 1996, the United States started negotiations with North Korea over its ballistic missile program, subsequently holding six more rounds of talks through the end of the Clinton administration (Yun 2000; Mistry 2003, 728–52). These talks were designed to suspend and ultimately eliminate development, testing, and exports of North Korean ballistic missiles. In the early rounds, North Korea made clear that its missile program was for sale, seeking more than one billion dollars in return for shutting it down. Instead of buying out North Korea’s missiles, during the fourth round of talks in March 1999, the United States offered relief from US-imposed sanctions in exchange for a missile moratorium. In September 1999 during a subsequent round in Berlin, a small breakthrough was reached when North Korea announced a moratorium on all missile tests as long as missile negotiations continued; for its part, the United States agreed to a partial lifting of economic sanctions (though sanctions would not be lifted until June 2000).

**High-level Visits**

As KEDO’s work, heavy fuel oil shipments, and the missile talks proceeded on notionally separate tracks and with variable reliability, several important high-level diplomatic exchanges occurred, particularly during the end of the Clinton administration. Shortly after stepping down as Secretary of Defense, William Perry visited Pyongyang in May 1999 in his new role as presidential envoy and coordinator for North Korea policy. Delivering a letter from President Clinton for Kim Jong-il, Perry asked the officials he met in North Korea to satisfy US concerns regarding nuclear-related activities that fall outside the scope of the Agreed Framework, as well as concerns relating to ballistic missile development and proliferation. In exchange, Perry informed the North Koreans that the United States was prepared to offer sanctions relief, normalization of diplomatic and economic relations, and some form of a security guarantee, the latter being something the United States had stated several times since 1993. Perry’s visit to Pyongyang was followed by an October 2000 visit to Washington by Vice Marshall Jo Myong-rok, First Vice Chairman of North Korea’s National Defense Commission, who met with President Clinton and his national security team. Jo’s visit, intended partly to

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coordinate Secretary of State Madeline Albright’s upcoming visit to Pyongyang, yielded an October 12 Joint Communiqué in which both sides agreed that neither harbored hostile intentions toward the other and that resolving the missile issue would be a positive step toward improving relations (Chinoy 2008, 20–26). And on October 23, 2000, Secretary Albright met with North Korea’s Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang, the first and still only US official to do so (Albright 2005, 455–73). Wendy Sherman (2001), who replaced William Perry as policy coordinator for North Korea toward the end of the Clinton administration and who accompanied Secretary Albright to Pyongyang, speculated that had President Clinton visited Pyongyang following Albright’s visit, North Korea may have conceded terms on its missile program (Sherman 2001; Chinoy 2008, 27–34).

Reinforcing Threat Perceptions

Despite the clear rapprochement trend in the years immediately following the Agreed Framework, several events during the same period were wholly inconsistent with attempts to establish mutual expectations of peaceful coexistence. In August 1998, intelligence assessments claiming that North Korea may have been violating the Agreed Framework by secretly reconstructing an underground plutonium processing facility at Kumchang-ri leaked to the press (Sanger 1998). This public revelation compelled the Clinton administration to negotiate direct access to Kumchang-ri, which had begun by August 21 (Chang 1999). On March 16, 1999, US inspectors secured access to Kumchang-ri to verify whether North Korea was in violation of the Agreed Framework, but the price for access was some 500,000 tons of food aid, which the United States paid (Niksch 2002). The first US visit to Kumchang-ri took place in May 1999, with a subsequent visit in May 2000. On June 25, 1999, the State Department announced it found no evidence of suspicious or agreement-violating activities taking place at Kumchang-ri, though it refused to rule out the possibility that nuclear-related activities had been undertaken there previously; the May 2000 visit similarly found no evidence of plutonium processing (US Department of State 1999).

While the Kumchang-ri incident may have been representative of the mistrust and skepticism of many in the United States toward North Korea’s commitment to rapprochement, it was neither baseless nor an isolated incident. In the months prior to the Kumchang-ri leak, Department of Defense (DoD) officials revealed that North Korea had successfully developed a missile capable of hitting South Korea and parts of Japan. Reinforcing US suspicions of North Korea further, on August 31, the same month that the Kumchang-ri accusations became public, North Korea launched a three-staged Taepodong-1 intercontinental ballistic missile that flew over Japan and had the reported capability of reaching western parts of the United States (Niksch 2002). And by June 1999, it became public that North Korea was trafficking in missile components in violation of sanctions (Kim 2000; Lee 2002). Further, while the Agreed Framework was written with sufficient ambiguity that North Korea never technically failed to comply with the Agreed Framework under Clinton, North Korea arguably failed to live up to the spirit of the agreement by not taking several steps that were called for: it did not dismantle the nuclear reactors at Yongbyon and Taechon; it never came into full compliance with its IAEA obligations; and it did not declare or allow inspectors at all nuclear facilities (Cossa 1999).

For its part, the United States also sent signals that ran contrary to the rapprochement initiated in 1994 and accelerated in the first years of the George

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7In addition to missile activity described below, North Korean forces also staged a small-scale military attack against South Korea in 1996, ostensibly to influence the upcoming South Korean elections and split it from the United States, which the latter chose to ignore (Jung 1998).
W. Bush administration. Despite the January 20, 1995, announcement easing economic restrictions against North Korea, over the remainder of the Clinton administration new sanctions would be imposed on North Korea several times. On May 24, 1996, sanctions took effect targeting North Korea’s missile technology proliferation, followed by more targeted sanctions on August 6, 1997, April 17, 1998, April 6, 2000, and January 2, 2001. In addition, the United States also arguably failed to live up to the spirit of the Agreed Framework by failing to meet the timelines established for delivering the first of the LWRs. With groundbreaking on the first reactor site not occurring until August 1997 and a turn-key contract not being signed until 1999, even the most optimistic estimates of LWR completion admitted to facing a four-year delay that would not have North Korea realize the first reactor until at least 2007 (Niksch 2002, 8; Pollack 2003, 24). This led to unanswered calls from North Korea to provide additional economic compensation for the energy and economic productivity lost by not having access to LWR energy on the established target date in the Agreed Framework (Pollack 2003, 24). A 1999 GAO report somewhat corroborated North Korean claims in this regard, stating that fuel oil shipments to North Korea during the first three years of the Agreed Framework did not take place “on a regular and predictable schedule” (US General Accounting Office 1999, 9).

In the beginning of the George W. Bush administration, rapprochement initially continued, however haltingly. On June 13, 2001, US Special Envoy Jack Pritchard met with his North Korean counterpart in New York to arrange bilateral talks that were intended to address US concerns in a comprehensive manner. Senior level interaction between the United States and North Korea resumed on July 31, 2002, when Secretary of State Colin Powell held a sideline meeting with North Korean Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun during the ASEAN Regional Forum in Brunei. This meeting took place because Secretary Powell sought to arrange it of his own accord, independent of critical voices within the Bush administration (Funabashi 2008). These voices only grew louder after a North Korean naval skirmish with South Korea took place on July 2, leading to the cancellation of a planned US delegation to Pyongyang. Several months earlier, on April 1, President Bush issued a memorandum stating that he would not certify North Korea’s compliance with the Agreed Framework, but also did not prohibit the United States from continuing to provide heavy fuel oil and seek funding for the LWRs under KEDO, which continued (Pritchard 2007). Pritchard would immediately follow Powell’s interaction with a trip to Pyongyang for the pouring of the concrete foundation for the first LWR on August 2 (Pritchard 2007). From October 3–5, 2002, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly visited Pyongyang to have a comprehensive discussion about US security concerns and to confront North Korea with knowledge that North Korea was secretly cultivating a uranium enrichment program. Accounts differ on what precisely was said by each side, but this interaction would become the unequivocal beginning of the end of rapprochement between the United States and North Korea. At US urging and in response to the failed Kelly talks of the previous month, on November 14, KEDO announced suspension of heavy fuel oil deliveries to North Korea, effectively terminating US and international support for the Agreed Framework (Chinoy 2008; Funabashi 2008). The IAEA followed this announcement with a November 29 resolution calling for North Korea to clarify its uranium enrichment activity. Finally, in December 2002, North Korea broke the seals and dismantled the monitoring equipment that the IAEA had emplaced as part of the verifiable freeze of its reactors under the terms of the Agreed Framework, expelled IAEA inspectors, and, on January 10, 2003, announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) (Pollack 2003).
Threat Consensus and Fragile Rapprochement

This section undertakes two tasks: (1) it shows the presence of a threat consensus about North Korea among US policy elites by examining statements and actions coming from the US Congress, as well as statements coming from the Clinton and Bush administrations following the signing of the Agreed Framework in October 1994 and (2) it illustrates how the presence of such a consensus in this case subverted the Clinton administration’s rapprochement strategy.

The discourse perpetuated by US elites in the legislative and executive branches of government—that North Korea constituted a threat—persisted even as the United States was taking explicit steps toward rapprochement with North Korea. The pinnacle of US–North Korea relations took place in 2000, at least two years after the United States was already aware that North Korea was secretly developing a uranium enrichment program (Bermudez 1999, 45; Niksch 2006, 11). The Bush administration’s Secretary of State, Colin Powell, had even acknowledged that before his high-level interaction with his North Korean counterpart in Brunei in July 2002, he was already aware of intelligence indicating that North Korea was developing a covert uranium enrichment program (Pincus 2003).

These facts pose several problems for the seemingly obvious account that pins rapprochement failure on divergent policy preferences between the Clinton and Bush administrations. First, because US policy elites knew of North Korea’s clandestine nuclear developments prior to the most positive point in US–North Korea relations, North Korea’s capabilities cannot be considered a sufficient explanation of US policy vacillations over time. Second, the idea that the Bush administration simply ended rapprochement because it had more hawkish policy preferences ignores the reality on the ground: the Bush administration continued rapprochement for more than a year before its collapse, even knowing that North Korea was in violation of the Agreed Framework.

A Rapprochement Free of Trust and Support?

From the outset of the Agreed Framework, the Clinton administration, which negotiated the agreement without first consulting Republicans in Congress, characterized it repeatedly as an agreement wholly absent of trust or good faith. In essence, the Clinton administration, the strongest advocate of the Agreed Framework, presented it as a rapprochement effort that preserved the threatening view of North Korea that was long held in US politics. Even as the Clinton administration lobbied capitals for KEDO funding and provided heavy fuel oil, food assistance, and high-level diplomatic exchanges, it continued to describe North Korea as an untrustworthy threat to US national security interests.

In January 1995, three months after the Agreed Framework took effect, Winston Lord, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, delivered a speech in which he characterized the Agreed Framework as the best way to address North Korea’s nuclear threat, achieved through cold reciprocity, stating flatly, “This agreement is not based on trust. In addition to international verification, there are built-in checkpoints... Specific leverage will ensure that North Korea derives no advantages that do not also promote regional and global stability” (US Department of State 1995a). Secretary of State Warren Christopher described the Agreed Framework similarly: “…we are under no illusions about North Korea. Implementation of the framework will be based upon verification, not trust” (US Department of State 1995b). In 1995 alone, the Clinton administration would state publicly on at least four more occasions that the pursuit of rapprochement was not based on trust but reciprocity and verification.8

8For a compendium of Clinton administration statements on the Agreed Framework, see US Department of State, Dispatch, especially Vol. 6, p. 4–9.
The Republican Party, which took control of Congress in 1994, was critical of the Agreed Framework from its inception, expressing skepticism and signaling opposition (Wilborn 1995). Within weeks of its signing, Republican members of Congress equated the agreement to appeasement, and expressed a lack of confidence that improving relations with North Korea was not going to solve the threat that the United States faced from North Korea (Wit, Poneman, and Gallucci 2004, 335–36). In a January 1995 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, Senator Strom Thurmond complained that “North Korea’s nuclear weapons program was designed to extract diplomatic and economic benefits from the free world in order to perpetuate the regime” (US Senate 1995, 3). During the same hearing, Senator John McCain asserted that “North Korea will renege on this agreement,” that “North Korea has a well-established record of breaking its commitments to the United States,” and that the agreement was “based not on trust, but on wishful thinking” (US Senate 1995a, 5–6).

In addition to this rhetoric, in 1995 the Republican-controlled House of Representatives attempted to advance H.R. 1561, the American Overseas Interests Act, which would have placed serious restraints and caveats on the implementation of the already negotiated Agreed Framework. Secretary Christopher wrote to the Speaker of the House in May 1995 to protest the bill, arguing that it “would compromise our ability to follow through on the North Korea Agreed Framework” (Christopher 1995). Although the Clinton administration tried to avoid relying on congressional support for the implementation of its North Korea policy by sometimes reprogramming DoD and Department of Energy funds to fulfill Agreed Framework commitments,9 Republicans continued to make their views of North Korea known. Congressional Republicans pushed legislation like the Congressional Oversight of Nuclear Transfers to North Korea Act, which the House of Representatives passed on May 15, 2000, prohibiting the United States from nuclear cooperation until it could certify to Congress that “North Korea has come into full compliance with the Agreed Framework and other specified nuclear nonproliferation agreements” (US House of Representatives 2000a). House Republicans also introduced the North Korea Nonproliferation Act of 2000, requiring biannual reports from the Clinton administration documenting all North Korean sales of missile technology and violations of its missile moratorium and calling for the imposition of sanctions in the event of any violation (US House of Representatives 2000b).

A Bipartisan Threat

Despite the competing perspectives of the Agreed Framework advanced by the Clinton administration and congressional Republicans respectively, there was nevertheless agreement among them regarding perceptions of North Korea as constituting a threat to US interests. Four documents in particular capture the US consensus on North Korea: the “Perry Report” reviewing US North Korea policy reflected the Clinton administration perspective; the North Korea Advisory Group Report to the Speaker of the House reflected the sense of the congressional majority; the “Rumsfeld Commission” report to Congress on ballistic missile threats; and the Richard Armitage study that resulted in the “Comprehensive Approach to North Korea,” which reflected the views of the incoming George W. Bush administration, as did the Rumsfeld Commission report. These documents are representative not only of the breadth of the consensus about North Korea’s character, but also of the relevant perspectives influencing US policy toward North Korea during the formidable period of attempted rapprochement. Whatever

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9This is described by a former Clinton administration official who helped craft the Agreed Framework (Wit 2000).
disagreements existed regarding the policy efficacy of the Agreed Framework, there
seemed to be little disagreement about the threat that North Korea posed to US
security interests.

In July 1998, only one month before North Korea launched its Taepodong-1 in-
tercontinental ballistic missile over Japan, a group of politically conservative schol-
ars and former government officials led by Donald Rumsfeld presented to the
Congress the findings of what is commonly referred to as the “Rumsfeld
Commission,” which responded to a congressional mandate to assess current and
future ballistic missile threats to the United States as a means of underscoring the
necessity for advanced investments in ballistic missile defense. The Rumsfeld
Commission identified North Korea as the greatest missile threat to the United
States, mentioning it by name more than thirty times in the body of the report,
more than any other foreign government (Report of the Commission to Assess
the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States 1998). The report described
North Korea’s different ballistic missiles and programs, identifying material po-
tentials as incontrovertible threats to US interests. Its TD-2 missile, for instance,
was identified as a major threat because it was theoretically (but not demon-
strated) capable of striking most parts of the United States. The report separately
identified North Korea’s Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) program and mis-
sile proliferation activity as distinct threats to US interests. And although North
Korea’s missile capabilities were outmatched by other countries mentioned in the
Rumsfeld Commission, notably China and Russia, the threat characterization and
inferences of malign intent in the report still exceeded that of any other govern-
ment. That only one month after the report was released North Korea would
launch a ballistic missile over Japan only strengthened the credibility of the report
and the consensus about the threat it posed.

In March 1999, former Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard Armitage (who
would become Deputy Secretary of State in the George W. Bush administration)
led a group of scholars and former officials in presenting a “Comprehensive
Approach to North Korea” in a forum at the National Defense University
(Armitage 1999). In the report, Armitage called Clinton administration policy to-
ward North Korea “fragmented,” arguing to only continue pursuing diplomacy
contingent on internal regime reforms and a modified Agreed Framework that
addressed the range of North Korean threats (Armitage 1999, 4). To prepare for
the possible failure of diplomacy, Armitage (1999) advocated taking steps to en-
hance deterrence, including shoring up alliance commitments, enhancing missile
defense cooperation with allies, increasing the tempo of military exercises, in-
creasing counter-battery radars, and announcing that the United States “is pre-
pared to augment forces in theater” (4–6). Presented several months before
Kumchang-ri inspections, which revealed no evidence of illicit North Korean nu-
clear activity since the Agreed Framework, Armitage’s approach rested on the
belief that North Korea had become more dangerous since the signing of the
Agreed Framework in 1994, citing specifically suspicions about activities at
Kumchang-ri (Han 2002). Armitage (1999) also argued that North Korea was us-
ing diplomatic initiatives with the United States to “buy time” in which to ad-
vance its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and that “North Korea’s provoca-
tive actions and belligerent posture have challenged—and taken advantage of—
our interest in stability. For Pyongyang, the lesson of the past four years is that
brinkmanship works” (Armitage 1999, 3).

In October 1999, former Secretary of Defense William Perry completed his
presidentially directed comprehensive review of US policy toward North Korea.
This policy review culminated in what is commonly referred to as the “Perry
Report,” which encompassed both the threat that North Korea posed to the
United States and the policy recommendations to address it (Perry 1999). The
Perry Report recommended enhanced US engagement with North Korea and
rapid implementation of the Agreed Framework, on the one hand, and enhanced
derterrence and containment if North Korea failed to cooperate with US efforts to
reduce mutual threat perceptions, on the other hand. It characterized North
Korea’s nuclear weapons- and missile-related programs as “near-term dangers to
stability,” and as the most acute threat of those that North Korea posed to the
United States and its allies (Perry 1999, 11). It concluded that the United States
should continue to implement the Agreed Framework; it made no mention of of-
fering security-relevant concessions to North Korea.

The month after the Perry Report was issued, the North Korea Advisory
Group—comprised of House Republicans—issued a politically motivated report
to the Speaker of the House that was in many ways a rebuke of the Perry Report
(North Korea Advisory Group 1999). Both reports, however, characterized the
threat that North Korea posed in similar terms. The report sought to answer
whether North Korea was more of a threat since the signing of the Agreed
Framework, concluding that North Korea posed more of a threat since the
Agreed Framework took effect:

North Korea’s WMD programs pose a major threat to the United States and its allies.
This threat has advanced considerably...the United States cannot discount the possi-
bility that North Korea could produce additional nuclear weapons outside of the
constraints imposed by the 1994 Agreed Framework...The progress that North
Korea has made over the past five years in improving its missile capabilities, its re-
cord as a major proliferator of ballistic missiles and missile technology, combined
with its development activities on nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, ranks
North Korea...as one of the greatest missile proliferation threats in the world.
(North Korea Advisory Group 1999)

The report even created a chart that correlated US aid to North Korea with its
progress in developing ballistic missile technology, ostensibly to illustrate that
conciliation toward North Korea increased the danger it posed.

**How the Threat Consensus Explains Rapprochement Failure**

The US consensus about the threat that North Korea posed intervened to make
rapprochement failure more likely in all three ways posited here.

The first can be seen in the way the Clinton administration’s policy of rap-
prochement emerged in the first place: as a suboptimal but acceptable exigency
to address a North Korean nuclear threat that it believed would otherwise grow
unchecked or require conflict to halt. At several points during the 1994 crisis that
culminated in the Agreed Framework, US officials, including the negotiators, ex-
pressed a desire to coerce North Korea—and attempted to do so sporadically—but in the heat of the moment often opted instead to offer concessions that at
least partially met North Korean demands. The stated US preference was for coer-
cion, and its stated belief that North Korea posed a threat was evident. The con-
text from which the Agreed Framework came—crisis and ratcheting coercion—
was not one that included consideration of a range of concessionary packages or
implementation approaches. Rapprochement as a US strategy was construed in
one very narrow way: in the gradualist approach represented in the Agreed
Framework, which did not even originate from within the Clinton administra-
tion.10 In the various memoirs and records of events, there is no evidence of a
debate about whether a tit-for-tat engagement strategy would be preferable to al-
ternative engagement strategies. The threat consensus perspective accounts for
this absence of alternative rapprochement strategies as being reflective of the

10 The Agreed Framework resulted from the unsanctioned involvement of former President Jimmy Carter. It co-
incided with, and deflated, gradual escalation of threatening rhetoric and military preparations by both sides.
threat discourse within the United States: if the threat was sufficiently serious to warrant a crisis in the first place, then a rapprochement strategy with even greater conciliatory or unilaterally accommodative terms than the Agreed Framework would be too taboo to consider, sitting outside the boundaries of logically permissible policy options. The Clinton administration considered alternative strategies to gradualist rapprochement—including increased coercive threats or preventive strikes against North Korean facilities—but they were not conciliatory in nature.

The threat consensus also impinged on rapprochement by virtue of the Clinton administration’s modest approach and concessions to what amounted to a core security concern on North Korea’s part. From the US perspective, the necessarily ambitious goal of the diplomatic engagement process and US concessions—symbolic and material—was to freeze and eventually eliminate North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs. US officials made clear that a conciliatory approach to North Korea was a means to an end, devoid of good faith, and that continuing the Agreed Framework’s implementation was contingent on verifiable North Korean reciprocity. The goal of a nuclear-free and nonthreatening North Korea was sufficiently important to warrant an attempt at rapprochement, according to Secretary of State Warren Christopher and others in the administration (US Department of State 1995a, 1995b). The means employed to achieve that goal—on the principle of simultaneous action—were incommensurate. None of the US concessions, which included food assistance, heavy fuel oil shipments, and the promise of civilian nuclear energy reactors, required any actions that would render the United States vulnerable in a security sense, which would have been the strongest type of credible signal of benign intent. As long as US accommodation of North Korean demands was limited to mostly nonsecurity-related concessions, such measures only had a chance of signaling benign intent if reliably implemented and with minimal contradictory signaling. Yet from North Korea’s perspective, progressively more sanctions coming from Congress, accusations of North Korean nuclear cheating at Kumchang-ri, repeated delays in delivering heavy fuel oil, and stalled progress in constructing LWRs all raised doubts about the willingness of the United States to follow through on its commitment to rapprochement. The tight and contingent sequencing required of the step-by-step approach, compounded by the absence of grand accommodative gestures commensurate with the grand objective of disarming North Korea, left the rapprochement process highly vulnerable to unraveling.

The third and final way the threat consensus adversely conditioned the rapprochement process was by biasing interpretations of North Korean word and deed as the process ensued. The threat consensus lent credence to interpreting North Korean behavior skeptically and drawing malign, adversarial conclusions where its behavior allowed. US policy elites with hawkish policy preferences construed North Korean ballistic missile tests as validating their claims that engagement with North Korea only worsened the threat it posed, an interpretation that justified imposing measures like economic sanctions and withholding KEDO funding, both of which undermined rapprochement. And when even small amounts of evidence suggested North Korea might be violating the terms of the Agreed Framework, as with US accusations about facilities at Kumchang-ri, opponents to rapprochement sought to show North Korea’s double-dealing. This is logically consistent with behavioral expectations of those with hawkish preferences, but more importantly, it was justified because rapprochement was only permissible to the extent that it could claim to be progressing toward its claimed goal of a nonthreatening North Korea. During the Clinton administration, any evidence that implied North Korea was becoming more of a threat, or that showed North Korea violating the terms that had been negotiated, was a justification for disrupting the rapprochement policy. During the Bush administration, such
evidence justified a confrontational approach that altogether abandoned the Agreed Framework process as soon as new evidence would reaffirm it.

Implications for the Theory and Practice of Rapprochement

Events in this case prove an odd fit with much of the rapprochement literature, yet serve as a plausible illustration of how a threat consensus may impinge on rapprochement processes. As a specific type of major foreign policy change, rapprochement is understandably difficult, plagued as it is by standard dilemmas that states face when lacking clarity about the intentions of others (Montgomery 2006). The US–North Korea case shows that, in the presence of a threat consensus about the adversary, attempts at pursuing rapprochement can be even more fraught. The US threat consensus about North Korea in the 1990s and early 2000s constrained the only feasible rapprochement strategy to one that involved reciprocit and simultaneous action, tied the hands of US officials offering concessions to North Korea and sending inconsistent signals about US intentions incommensurate with the goal of defusing North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, and justified opponents of the Agreed Framework disrupting the rapprochement process by imposing an interpretive frame on North Korean word and deed that showed North Korea to be either a growing threat or a liar incapable of fulfilling its commitments under the Agreed Framework. Although only a single case, this offers several potential insights for the study and practice of rapprochement.

For the study of rapprochement, the threat consensus offers an explanatory mechanism for how the absence of purported necessary conditions for rapprochement success, like compatible national identities and geopolitical interests, prevents such a process from succeeding. Necessary conditions for rapprochement success may explain not only how a threat consensus forms—which lay outside the scope of this article—but also why the conditions are necessary, which the rapprochement literature largely fails to do. Showing the presence of an explanatory mechanism in a single case is sufficient to pursue further research on the matter. Subsequent research can build on the concept advanced here by revisiting other cases of rapprochement failure to observe whether the absence of necessary conditions for rapprochement success covary with the presence or absence of a threat consensus, as well as whether linkages can be traced that explain the formation of a threat consensus in terms of the absence of necessary conditions.

The threat consensus also presents one specific way to account for why and when iterative learning games that proceed on a rational basis—and which claim to show how cooperation can happen even under conditions of uncertainty and imperfect information (Axelrod 1984)—may not play out as expected. As states enter into a tit-for-tat game of reciprocal cooperation, for example, one player’s discourse about another player is, minimally, a potentially nontrivial factor that should be accounted for. Maximally, we might posit that games where a threat consensus is present about one of the players represent “least likely” cases for rapprochement games to succeed. The presence of a threat consensus, in other words, potentially dulls the effects of rational cooperation games; such is the case in US–North Korea rapprochement, but the proposition needs to be assessed in other dyads.

Finally, the logical implication of the argument presented here is that a weak or fractured threat consensus should serve as a more amiable condition under which rapprochement might succeed. While the goal of this article was not to treat the threat consensus as an independent variable and then test the variable effect it has on outcomes by variation in its value, we might nevertheless expect that a rapprochement process—especially the gradualist approach to it—stands a better chance of success in the absence of a threat discourse about an adversary. At the time of this writing, the Obama administration has undertaken rapprochement
efforts with both Myanmar and Cuba that have shown progress; minimally we can say that neither case of rapprochement has yet proven a failure (Clapp 2010; Farley 2014). In both cases, the United States is engaging an historical adversary absent any discourse among US policy elites about either posing a threat to US security. Such cases suggest the possibility that a fractured or absent threat consensus is indeed a more favorable condition under which to pursue rapprochement.

References


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