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The Trump administration has been telling people for months that the crisis with North Korea is the result of North Korea's relentless pursuit of a nuclear threat to the US homeland and past North Korean cheating on diplomatic agreements. However, North Korea reached agreements with both the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations that could have averted that threat, had they been completed. Instead, a group of Bush administration officials led by then-Vice President Dick Cheney sabotaged both agreements.

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Instead, a group of Bush administration officials led by then-Vice President Dick Cheney sabotaged both agreements, and Pyongyang went on to make rapid strides on both nuclear and missile development, leading ultimately to the successful late November 2017 North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test.

The record shows, moreover, that Cheney and his allies derailed diplomatic efforts to curb North Korean nuclear and missile development, not because they opposed "arms control" (after all, the agreements that were negotiated would have limited only North Korean arms), but because those agreements would have been a political obstacle to fielding the group's main interest: funding and fielding a national missile defense system as quickly as possible.

The story of Cheney's maneuvering to kill two agreements shows how a real US national security interest was sacrificed to a massive military boondoggle that served only the interests of the powerful contractors behind it.

Curbing North Korean Arms or Missile Defense?

In October 1994, the Bill Clinton administration reached a historic agreement with North Korea called the "Agreed Framework," under which Pyongyang agreed to freeze its existing plutonium reactor and related facilities within a month, with full monitoring by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and to dismantle them as soon as they could be replaced with light water reactors.

The United States promised to provide the reactors, as well fuel oil, until the light water reactors were built. And even more crucially, the US also pledged to take steps to end the enmity toward North Korea and normalize relations between the two longtime adversaries.

No sooner had the Clinton administration negotiated the "Agreed Framework," however, than the Republicans gained control of both houses of Congress in the 1994 election. That seismic political shift enabled a powerful lobby of military contractors pushing for a national missile defense system to achieve a congressional mandate for rapid development and deployment of such a system.

It was a fateful convergence, because the missile defense lobby's strategy was to create a sense of urgency about an alleged imminent threat to the US homeland from ballistic missiles armed with nuclear weapons mounted by "rogue states" -- Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

And the Clinton administration's agreement with North Korea -- the only "rogue state" known to have a nuclear weapons program as well as a missile program -- threatened that missile defense lobby strategy.

When a 1995 CIA intelligence estimate said that none of the three "rogue states" would have ballistic missiles capable of threatening the United States for at least 15 years, the missile defense lobby got Congress to pass legislation creating a "national commission" on the ballistic missile threat that would contradict the CIA assessment.

The commission, led by Republican hard-liner Donald Rumsfeld, asserted in its final report in July 1998 that either Iraq or North Korea might acquire long-range ballistic missiles capable of hitting the United States in as little as five years. In a craven retreat under political pressure, the CIA then largely adopted the commission's argument.

North Korea had only carried out two tests of medium or longer-range missiles in the decade from 1988 to 1998, neither of which had been successful, so the Clinton administration was not focused on the threat of an ICBM: It held just two rounds of talks on the ballistic missile program between 1996 and 1998.

In fact, it was not the United States, but North Korea that proposed an agreement in 1998 that would end its development of new missiles as part of a broader peace agreement with Washington.

When the United States failed to respond to the proposal, however, North Korea launched a three-stage rocket called the Taepodong on August 31, 1998, which the missile lobby and news media argued was a major step toward a North Korean ICBM. The missile lobby used that event to push for legislation establishing a national policy goal to deploy an "effective National Missile Defense System" as soon as technologically possible.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il was using the regime's missile development as a prod to get the Clinton administration to negotiate a deal that would include concrete steps toward normalization of relations. He even sent a personal envoy to Washington to present the outline of a new North Korean offer to give up the regime's quest for an ICBM, as well as its nuclear weapons capability.

In October 2000, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright went to Pyongyang, and the two sides came close to a final agreement that would have ended North Korean missile development as well as its nuclear weapons program and led to normalizing relations.

But Clinton didn't go to North Korea to sign the deal in the final months of his presidency, and the election of George W. Bush in November 2000 was a major victory for the missile defense lobby. Bush named Rumsfeld, the primary political champion of a missile defense system, as his Secretary of Defense.

And no less than eight figures with direct or indirect ties to Lockheed Martin, the leading defense contractor in the missile defense business, became policymakers in the new administration. The most important was Dick Cheney, whose wife, Lynn Cheney, had earned more than half a million dollars serving on the board of directors of Lockheed-Martin from 1994 to 2001.

Cheney set about killing the Agreed Framework and securing the missile defense system even before Bush entered the White House. Cheney chose Robert Joseph, a hardline supporter of missile defense and foe of an agreement with North Korea, as a key member of the transition team that Cheney led. Cheney then made Joseph senior director on the National Security Council (NSC) staff with responsibility for both missile defense and "weapons of mass destruction" proliferation policy.

"Joseph really hated the Agreed Framework," Larry Wilkerson, then in the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, told journalist Mike Chinoy. "His objective was first to kill the Agreed Framework and to make sure that nothing like it could ever get created again."

Joseph's first project was to draft a National Security Presidential Directive that laid out a "new strategic framework," essentially built around a ballistic missile defense system, as Joseph later told a National Defense University researcher.

Joseph drafted a speech that the president gave on May 1, 2001, in which Bush debuted a new central argument for national missile defense. "Deterrence can no longer be based solely on the threat of nuclear retaliation," Bush declared, adding that missile defense system could "strengthen deterrence by reducing the incentive for proliferation."

Cheney and Bolton Go for the Kill

Colin Powell's State Department posed the main obstacle to the Cheney group's plans for trashing the Agreed Framework. The Department's East Asian Bureau got Bush's approval for a formal policy review on North Korea, which concluded by defining the policy goal of exploring a deal with North Korea that would involve "an improved relationship."

But Cheney had a bureaucratic strategy to frustrate that endeavor and finish off the Agreed Framework. The NSC staff initiated a "nuclear posture review," which was carried out without any participation by Powell's allies. The final document included North Korea on a new list of countries that could be targets for US use of nuclear weapons.

That designation, which was leaked to the press in March 2002, conflicted directly with the US pledge in the Agreed Framework to "provide formal assurances to the DPRK, against the threat or use of nuclear weapons by the US."

Then Bush's State of the Union message in January 2002 introduced the idea of North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" along with Iran and Iraq. That was not merely a throwaway line introduced by a speechwriter, but reflected lobbying by Cheney and Rumsfeld for "toughening sanctions and isolation to lay the groundwork for regime change in North Korea," according to Condoleezza Rice's memoir, *No Higher Honor*.

John Bolton, Cheney's proxy in the State Department on proliferation issues, writes in his memoir *Surrender is Not an Option* that he considered the "axis of evil" speech a signal that he could now begin a bureaucratic offensive aimed at killing the Agreed Framework. Bolton recalls that he pushed the State Department to adopt the position that North Korea was out of compliance with the Agreed Framework for having "failed to make a complete and accurate declaration of its nuclear activities and refused to allow inspection of related facilities."

However, Bolton was misrepresenting the terms of the agreement, which provided that North Korea would come into full compliance with its safeguards agreement, including the accuracy and completeness of its declaration on its nuclear program, "[w]hen a significant portion of the LWR [light water reactor] project is completed, but before delivery of key nuclear components." Construction on the light water reactor had not even begun in 2002, when the State Department notified Congress that North Korea was out of compliance.

Bolton's plan was frustrated temporarily by resistance from the NSC, over which then-National Security Adviser Rice had some influence. But the decisive blow to the Agreed Framework came in July 2002, when, according to his memoir, Bolton obtained an intelligence assessment stating that North Korea "began seeking centrifuge-related materials in large quantities" in 2001, and that it had "obtained equipment suitable for use in uranium feed and withdrawal

systems."

Bolton recalls that the new intelligence finding was "the hammer I had been looking for to shatter the Agreed Framework." He argued in interagency meetings that North Korea had pledged to "take steps to implement the North-South Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," and therefore any North Korean move toward uranium enrichment violated its commitment.

Bolton was creating another false issue. Robert Carlin, a North Korea expert and adviser to the US negotiators, has pointed out that the reference to that document was an "afterthought" and that "no one really believed that the reference to the North-South agreements would constitute one of the core DPRK obligations" in the agreement.

Bush's negotiator with North Korea, Charles L. Pritchard, suggested bringing the uranium enrichment issue into the Agreed Framework, using the North Korean interest in normalization as negotiating leverage, according to Bolton. He also warned that if the United States withdrew from the agreement, North Korea would resume its plutonium program or start a new uranium program.

However, Bolton recalls telling Pritchard that wouldn't make "the slightest difference," because North Korea already had enough plutonium for "several weapons." In fact, it was not at all clear that Pyongyang had already converted plutonium into a single nuclear weapon.

However, Bolton showed no apparent concern about North Korea's long-range missile program, which the Clinton administration and North Korea had agreed would be negotiated in conjunction with moves toward normalization. "I wanted a decisive conclusion that the Agreed Framework was dead," Bolton writes.

In October 2002, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly went to Pyongyang with explicit orders, which Rice attributes to those who were undermining diplomacy, to accuse Pyongyang of cheating on the agreement by having a uranium enrichment program.

North Korea's First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju did not deny the government's interest in uranium enrichment, but said it was a response to the clear indications from the Bush administration that it had no intention to improve relations with his government. He also said North Korea was prepared to negotiate on all enrichment, including uranium, if the United States changed its hostile policy.

However, at an NSC meeting a week later, no one disagreed with the assertion that the Agreed Framework was dead, according to Bolton. In December 2002, the Bush administration strong-armed its Japanese and South Korean allies to end their supply of oil to the North Korea, officially terminating the Agreed Framework.

Cheney and his allies were clearing the political path to full funding for the national missile defense system they wanted to rush to deployment as quickly as possible. Rumsfeld had created a new Missile Defense Agency in the Pentagon in early 2002, which had unprecedented freedom from congressional or Department of Defense oversight.

They were also opening the floodgates for North Korean nuclear and missile development.

Cheney Kills Rice's North Korea Agreement

For the next three years, the Bush administration refused direct negotiations with North Korea. But Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice got Bush to agree in September 2005 to a joint statement of principles with North Korea in the context of Six-Party Talks.

In October 2007, Washington and Pyongyang negotiated an agreement under which Pyongyang would first seal and then disable its plutonium-based facilities for shipment of heavy fuel and provide a full accounting of its entire nuclear program, including uranium.

For its part, the US pledged to remove North Korea from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and lift other trade restrictions. In a later phase, the two sides would agree on a verification system and on steps leading to normalization of relations.

Then Cheney sabotaged the new agreement. In April 2007, Israel claimed Syria had built a nuclear reactor in the desert in eastern Syria with North Korean assistance. Bush's advisers all accepted the Israeli claim as true, but nearly a decade later, the IAEA's expert on North Korean reactors at the time revealed detailed technical evidence that had led him to conclude with certainty that the Syrian site could not possibly have been a North Korean-designed reactor.

Cheney seized on the alleged Syrian reactor to wrest control over North Korea policy from Rice. In a January 4, 2008 White House meeting, he recalls in his memoirs *In My Time* how he successfully prodded Bush and Rice to agree with his assumption that a "failure to admit they've been proliferating to the Syrians would be a deal killer." Two months later, Bush gave Cheney power to approve any joint US-North Korean text negotiated by the State Department.

Under pressure from Cheney, Rice adopted a new diplomatic strategy. In addition to their obligations in the first two phases of the October 2007 agreement, she writes in *No Higher Honor*, "[t]he North Koreans would also have to agree to a verification protocol to govern the on-site inspection of all aspects of their nuclear program."

That verification protocol -- not the actions pledged by Pyongyang in the October 2007 agreement -- would now be the basis for deciding whether the administration would take North Korea off the terrorist list and stop the application of the Trading with the Enemy Act.

Rice was changing the rules after the fact. After had North Korea delivered its declaration on its plutonium enrichment program in late June 2008, US negotiators sought North Korean agreement for inspectors to go into any site, whether declared or not, including sensitive military sites. Pyongyang conveyed its strong private objections to that, as well as to environmental sampling by inspectors. The 45-day period during which the United States was supposed to have taken its two small steps toward normalization came and went.

North Korea immediately accused the United States of violating the October agreement and suspended the disabling of its nuclear facilities. The US negotiator, Chris Hill, got what he regarded as North Korean verbal agreement to an amended version of the verification protocol, but North Korea would not sign it. On the basis of that unwritten understanding, Bush agreed to take North Korea off the US list of terrorist sponsors, and the physical disabling of the North

Korea's plutonium complex was completed.

But Bush insisted that North Korea sign the verification protocol, and in December, after Barack Obama's election, Pyongyang rejected the Bush administration's unilateral rewriting of the agreement, issuing a statement that it would only agree to intrusive inspections when US "hostile policy and nuclear threat to the North are fundamentally terminated." US-North Korean diplomacy on the October 2007 nuclear deal came to a halt.

Cheney and his allies had prevented the successful completion of two agreements that could have averted the present crisis with North Korea. When Bush took office in 2001, North Korea was believed to possess less than an atomic bomb's worth of plutonium. By the end of his second term, North Korea was already a nuclear power, with several nuclear weapons.

Even more significant, however, the Bush administration never even attempted to negotiate limits on North Korea's long-range missile program. That failure was very costly to the interests of the American people -- but it was a gift to the national missile defense program that has kept on giving.