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The Last Stake to the Palisade: How to Engage with North Korea

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States faces a worsening balance of power against China and should partner with North Korea (officially the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) to address it. Washington succeeded in turning adversaries into partners to face a greater common threat together in the past and can do this again with Pyongyang. Historical instances of normalization with former adversaries — most notably Yugoslavia — can serve as a blueprint to engage with North Korea while maximizing U.S. interests.

First, this paper explains why the United States should engage with North Korea. In recent years, China has increasingly swayed the Indo-Pacific region's balance of power in its favor. Beijing has translated its massive wealth into a more formidable military and threatens to achieve regional hegemony. Worsening the situation, China can count on the now nuclear-armed North Korea to support its ambitions. Although Washington has sluggishly reinforced its regional posture and partnerships to contain Chinese power, it has difficulty following China's breathtaking military build-up. A less adversarial North Korea would serve U.S. interests by helping Washington counterbalance China's growing capabilities.

Then, this paper proposes a typology of past engagement with former adversaries. It discusses several types of alignment options and their associated benefits and costs, illustrating these alignment types with historical examples. Based on this typology, quiet, non-institutionalized security cooperation resembling the Yugoslav model would maximize U.S. interests while limiting potential costs. The paper makes the case that Washington should discontinue its confrontational stance toward Pyongyang in favor of a Yugoslav-like rapprochement. The paper proposes three realistic policies to kick-start rapprochement:

1. U.S. policymakers should invest in discreet, low-visibility diplomacy to engage North Korea but eschew summits and public agreements.
2. The defense community should plan for the day when engaging North Korea comes so policymakers can use the North Korean card against China to its best.
3. Washington should encourage its partners to engage with North Korea to reassure Pyongyang and

reduce its dependence on China.

The Rationale for Engaging North Korea

Preventing China from achieving hegemony over the Indo-Pacific region is now arguably the United States' most important foreign policy objective. However sluggishly, Washington has increased its regional military presence, strengthened old alliances, made new partners, and sought to slow Chinese economic growth. Yet, North Korea remains a foreign policy black hole, and America's approach to the DPRK has changed little since the 2000s. The unswerving commitment to confront Pyongyang at every corner for its nuclear program continues without much of a second thought.

This paper offers to rethink America's relations with North Korea in the background of China's rise as a potential hegemon in East Asia. Specifically, it proposes a typology of alignment to discover the best way to engage Pyongyang and maximize U.S. interests. It argues that American decision-makers should follow the path their predecessors took with Yugoslavia during the early Cold War: turning Belgrade from foe to friend and weakening the Soviet position in Europe while avoiding unwanted escalation. This discussion leads to three main policy recommendations: (1) discreet diplomacy, (2) upstream preparation, and (3) the use of third parties as facilitators.

The DPRK matters in deciding the outcome of the Sino-U.S. rivalry for several reasons. North Korea is now a full-fledged nuclear power and possesses one of the world's largest militaries (although an outdated one in many ways). To China, the DPRK is an unwelcome addition of power to Beijing's. On America's side, Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and million-odd army would help counterbalance China's growing military capabilities. A friendly North Korea would immobilize significant Chinese forces to defend the Manchurian border. Consequently, China would have fewer forces available to bring to bear against the United States or partners such as Taiwan, Vietnam, or India.

Furthermore, hostility between the two Koreas forces them to focus their defense posture almost exclusively against the other, leaving South Korea unable to participate much in balancing China should it desire to. If Washington normalized relations with Pyongyang, it would help pacify the Peninsula and free South Korean bandwidth for containing China. Just as the shared Soviet threat combined with American engagement facilitated the West-European reconciliation after World War II, the combination of Chinese threat and American engagement could dramatically improve North-South Korea relations.¹

North Korean leaders have expressed their concerns about China's growing power, as well as a willingness to work with Washington to contain Beijing.² Yet, successive American administrations have failed to seize this opportunity due to their shared commitment to a failed policy of confronting the DPRK at every corner.

North Korea's capital sin is its blossoming nuclear arsenal. To summarize, "the 30-year U.S. effort to compel North Korea to give up its ballistic missile and nuclear weapons capabilities has rested on offering Pyongyang a simple choice: a relationship with the United States, or weapons and isolation."³ Preventing North Korean proliferation through sanctions was defensible during the 1990s and 2000s, when America was the unrivaled superpower, and the DPRK had yet to muster a functional nuclear deterrent. But the United States now confronts a peer competitor, and Pyongyang has become a tertiary concern. Meanwhile, North Korea's nuclear deterrent is now a hard fact that Washington's incantations will not chant away.⁴

Allying with Former Rivals: A Typology

Alignment Types

This section describes the main forms cooperation among former adversaries can take and proposes a typology of alignment against a common threat. Alignment or alliance entails "formal or informal relationship of security cooperation [...] some level of commitment and an exchange of benefits for both

parties; severing the relationship or failing to honor the agreement would presumably cost something, even if it were compensated in other ways.”⁵ The five alignment types are only ideal, as borders between them are often blurred in the real world. However, this typology represents a starting base for discussing rapprochement with North Korea.

Quiet security cooperation. Quiet security cooperation implies low-key, low-visibility exchanges concerning a common threat. The two partners typically exchange intelligence about the adversary’s intentions and capabilities, allow the intermittent use of their territory for intelligence or military operations, and coordinate their strategies and actions. The more advanced partner can also provide access to critical technologies and technical capabilities, although in a secretive and deniable manner.

Overt security coordination. The next step is to cooperate overtly against the common threat. Similar cooperation occurs, but the two partners make clear that the common threat is the target. Public cooperation entails a greater commitment, thus offering a stronger deterrent value.

Economic support. Economic support can bolster an ally to resist a strong rival. Indeed, a wealthier ally can better develop its military, consolidate its state and society, and thus become more resilient against foreign threats. Economic support implies unequal trade and financial exchanges where one side purposefully accepts to transfer resources to its ally. It differs from mere economic intercourse, which happens even among rivals.⁶

Military support. Military support bolsters an ally’s war-fighting capabilities. It typically occurs through weapons sales, sometimes at discounted prices or even for free. It can also be large-scale training of the partner’s personnel. Military support is, per nature, a form of economic support since the aiding side offers military capabilities at reduced or even no cost for the receiver. It sometimes includes basing forces on the partner’s soil. Since adopting one’s weaponry and relying on its technical support engenders long-term path dependency, military support is a potent tool to widen the wedge between the new partner and the main rival and generate loyalty.⁷

These four types of support can combine into four

main alliance possibilities (*Table 1*). The absence of any tangible support defines a fifth category.

Table 1. Alignment Types

Alignment intensity	Economic support	Military support
Quiet security cooperation	Minimal (2)	Thick (4)
Overt security coordination	Thin (3)	Strong (5)

1. Hidden: The first type of alignment is a hidden, undisclosed partnership. Fearing a political backlash or international repercussions, one or the two partners refuse to engage in material cooperation. Cooperation is limited to low-visibility, deniable contacts. Typically, political leaders will reassure each other and sometimes coordinate policies privately but deny any public contact or sympathy.

An example of hidden alignment is the Israeli-Jordan entente after the 1967 Six-Day War. Jordan had no intention of defying Israel anymore, and the two engaged in quiet diplomacy. In September 1970, Palestinian insurgents attempted to overthrow the Jordanian monarchy with the support of Syria, which sent its military across the border. The Jordanians requested Israeli help and Israel alerted its military and flew reconnaissance missions over the advancing Syrian columns. Fearing a new war with Israel, the Syrians retreated. Although there was almost no direct, material cooperation between Israel and Jordan until the 1994 peace treaty, they successfully contained their common foes through quiet diplomacy.⁸

2. Minimal: Minimal support entails quiet, low-visibility security exchanges and some economic support. Economic support often takes the form of direct budgetary donations, government-sponsored investments and credits, and preferential access to one’s market. This aims to build up the partner’s long-term stability and resilience without exciting the main rival’s fears. It can also reduce the partner’s economic dependency on the rival, thus insulating it against the rival’s influence or coercion.

Finland and the United States were initially on opposite sides during World War II. Although U.S.-Finnish relations quickly warmed after the war, Finland conceded security guarantees to the Soviet Union to appease Moscow and was adamant about maintaining neutrality in the Cold War. Thus, U.S. support was limited to the economic recovery of Finland, as both Helsinki and Washington understood that Moscow would react violently to open military cooperation.⁹

3. Thin: Thin cooperation combines economic support with limited but tangible security cooperation. Security cooperation remains constrained for domestic political or diplomatic motives but is publicly assumed nonetheless. It typically focuses on intelligence exchanges and niche capabilities. Direct military exchanges — notably, providing major weapon systems — remain extremely limited. The receiver benefits from the stronger partner's resources to grow its economy and access specific technical capabilities without tying its fate to its new ally.

China and the United States had conflictual relations from 1949 to the late 1960s. Relations became a thin alliance during the 1970s China-U.S. rapprochement to counterbalance the Soviet Union's growing power. The United States and China cooperated in the intelligence sphere, coordinated their anti-Soviet policies in Southeast Asia and Afghanistan, and Washington increasingly opened its market to China. However, security cooperation remained pretty constrained, and Beijing never grew dependent on American weaponry. A second example is Vietnam which, throughout the past two decades, followed Cold War-era China's path in gaining access to American trade and cooperating with Washington on security issues. However, direct defense cooperation remains limited.¹⁰

4. Thick:¹¹ In a thick alignment, the recipient of military support is afraid of the common rival enough to accept direct military aid but likely still fears a violent backlash. It may also be reluctant to acknowledge cooperation publicly due to ideological or domestic political motives. Therefore, the two partners will eschew open, explicit coordination targeting the common rival. Security and defense cooperation will be wide-ranging, but the actual target of the alliance will remain implicit.¹²

During the first years of the Cold War, Washington's relations with Yugoslavia were poisonous. But the Soviet-Yugoslav split in 1948 offered an opportunity to drive a wedge in the Soviet bloc. Meanwhile, Yugoslavia badly needed American support to build up its economy and military and resist Moscow's pressure. Open, institutionalized cooperation risked provoking a Soviet invasion. In addition, it was difficult for the leader of the free world and a communist regime to ally overtly. Thus, American economic and military support to Belgrade was discreet.

5. Strong: Strong alignment corresponds to a full-fledged, institutionalized alliance *à la* the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the U.S.-Japan alliance. Washington and its former rival openly cooperate in all matters of security and economy and do not shy away from designating the target. The United States will likely encourage the former rival to rearm and reorganize its military forces along U.S.-compatible lines for greater interoperability.

Egypt-U.S. relations during the early Cold War were tumultuous, and Cairo often sided with Moscow against Washington. But Egypt's decisive defeat during the 1973 Yom Kippur War forced a realignment from the Soviets to the Americans. Cairo soon became one of the largest recipients of U.S. aid and reequipped its armed forces with American material. Egypt and the United States closely cooperate, and Cairo developed a dependency on American security and military support.¹³

Alignment Benefits and Costs

The United States may incur two major benefits and two potential major costs when partnering with a former rival against a competing great power like China.¹⁴ *Table 2* summarizes the costs and benefits of the five abovementioned alignment types.

Deterrence strength. Supporting a former rival can make it more capable of deterring Chinese aggression. Deterrence is strong when China cannot obtain a decisive victory at little cost.¹⁵ Indirect and direct military assistance, as well as economic support, renders the former rival more capable of defending itself, thus complicating any Chinese

offensive intention. Solid allies help maintain the regional balance of power. However, this support does not necessarily transform the former adversary into a formidable fighting force to help Washington elsewhere.

Finland comes to mind. U.S. support helped Finland’s ‘porcupine’ strategy of resisting a Soviet invasion through total mobilization and asymmetric warfare. For the Soviets, Finland was thus a tough nut to crack, while the country was an important but not existential concern. Nevertheless, Finland’s contribution to a general European war would likely have remained limited. It had limited high-end warfare capabilities, and NATO had no easy way to reinforce the Finns. A decided Soviet offensive would probably have defeated and occupied Finland quite quickly.¹⁶

War-winning capabilities. Depending on its location and latent power, a former adversary may become a formidable asset to win a war. If the country borders China or musters a large population or economy, U.S. security support to build up its military could significantly increase the likelihood of victory during a war against China.

A former enemy turning into a formidable asset is post-World War II Germany. Washington helped West Germany rebuild its economy and rearm, despite the opposition of other European allies, to prevent Soviet hegemony over Europe. West Germany’s central position in Europe and economic might made it a formidable military bulwark to contain and potentially defeat the Soviets on the battlefield.¹⁷

Escalation risks. If it represents a significant power shift, China will particularly dislike rapprochement between the United States and a former adversary. The more open and menacing the rapprochement, the more Beijing will be pressed to harm or even preventively attack the former adversary, the United States, or both.

The United States had a deep-seated interest in supporting anti-Soviet insurrections in 1953 in East Germany, 1956 in Hungary, and 1968 in Czechoslovakia. Indeed, some American policymakers hoped to encourage these states to break with the Soviet Union and shift sides, thus rolling back Soviet power in Eastern Europe. However, Washington understood that Moscow would use

force to prevent open U.S. intervention in Eastern Europe and exercised restraint to avoid potentially catastrophic escalation.¹⁸

Betrayal costs. A former adversary may shift sides and become a threat again. The cost of betrayal will be low if the United States offered this state little actual capabilities and if it does not threaten to overturn the balance of power. But betrayal costs can be high if the United States has offered this state significant, sustainable military capabilities. If so, the state could become more capable of threatening core American interests.

China exemplifies the cost of supporting a potentially formidable state. The United States encouraged China’s rise even after the end of the Cold War with the naïve hope that it would turn into a pro-American, status quoist commercial power without hostile security ambitions. Yet, American money and technology only served to transform Beijing into a peer competitor and a potential hegemon in Asia.¹⁹

Table 2: Alignment Types’ Benefits and Costs for the United States

Benefits and costs	Low	Medium	High
Deterrence strength	(1) (2)	(3) (4)	(5)
War-winning capabilities	(1)	(2) (3)	(4) (5)
Escalation risks	(1) (2)	(3) (4)	(5)
Betrayal costs	(1)	(2) (3)	(4) (5)

Engaging North Korea like Yugoslavia

Benefits and Costs of Engaging North Korea

What would the United States gain or risk from supporting North Korea? Based on the above typology, which alignment choice would best further American interests?

Deterrence strength. North Korea boasts a massive military of around 1.2 million troops. The army alone has more than a million soldiers and a plethora of heavy weapons. Nevertheless, most weapons are old, unmodernized Chinese and Russian designs, and the actual combat readiness of the force is doubtful. The air force is large on paper, but the actual number of serviceable aircraft is small. The North Korean navy is weak; despite an impressive number of submarines, these are generally small and antiquated. The military can count on a gigantic reserve, but its competency is unclear.

Pyongyang compensates for its conventional forces' deficiencies by mustering a nuclear deterrent. North Korea has possessed nuclear weapons since 2006 and can now deliver nuclear strikes with short and medium-range ballistic missiles. Although its ability to lob a nuclear warhead at intercontinental range remains in doubt, Pyongyang is clearly capable of striking China and its main population and political centers.²⁰

Geography reinforces Pyongyang's resilience and favors the defense against a northerly attacker. North Korea's terrain is mainly mountainous, especially the northern half close to the Chinese border, which runs for almost 1,400 kilometers. It is mostly the product of two rivers, the Yalu and the Tumen, the former harder to cross than the latter.

A decided Chinese offensive could overwhelm North Korea, but a swift, easy victory is unlikely. A stubborn North Korean resistance taking full advantage of its gigantic military apparatus, its rugged terrain, and the inherent strength of the defense could spoil any Chinese blitzkrieg attempt. Beijing would be forced into a costly war of attrition. An essential factor in the equation is North Korea's nuclear arsenal, which would make the Chinese think twice before attempting an invasion.

To summarize, North Korea already has significant capabilities to deter China, despite its small power base. Since its military lacks modernization and its economy is in disarray, even limited American economic and military support would greatly increase Pyongyang's ability to defend itself and thus help maintain the regional balance of power. Unlike weaker allies like the Baltic states in Europe, North Korea does not require a massive commitment to

become viable.

War-winning capabilities. Controlling North Korea offers direct access to the Chinese state's core, and Beijing is only a little over 400 miles away in a straight line from the western tip of the Sino-DPRK border. A friendly North Korean sky would greatly facilitate U.S. air operations in wartime. Also, a hostile DPRK would weaken the Chinese navy's domination in the Yellow and Bohai Seas. The Yellow Sea matters tremendously for China, as it buffers the Beijing area, serves as a bastion for the Chinese navy, and holds significant natural resources.²¹ Pyongyang's oversized military would buttress American and allied forces in South Korea and Japan. Furthermore, it would immobilize sizeable Chinese forces to defend Manchuria, thus complicating Chinese operations on other fronts.

The DPRK's advantageous location and large military would improve America's chances during a general war with China. Since Pyongyang's forces suffer from chronic weaknesses in training and technology, American support would produce effects quickly and bolster North Korean potential still more. The United States thus has an interest in supporting the DPRK.

Escalation risks. As mentioned earlier, North Korea is a core Chinese interest due to geographical reasons.²² Historically, the Chinese reacted violently when a rival tried to control North Korea.²³ Hence, China would be hard-pressed to prevent a solid U.S.-North Korean partnership for obvious security reasons. The risks of escalation would be real, and the United States may want to minimize them.

Betrayal costs. If the United States engaged with the DPRK, betrayal would be a real possibility. North Korea is neither benign nor pro-status quo. First, North Korea still officially pursues the reunification of the Peninsula under its rule.²⁴ Second, divining a state's intentions with certainty is impossible.²⁵ The DPRK would likely reunify the Peninsula if it could easily do so. However, it cannot. Regardless of North Korea's genuine intentions, it has no easy pathway to conquer South Korea.²⁶ If South Korea's military deterrence weakened significantly, this could alter North Korea's motivations away from containing China and towards antagonizing the South. Therefore, rapprochement with North Korea should not come at the cost of South Korea's defense preparedness.

Since Pyongyang remains a small country, even comprehensive economic development would not fundamentally change the balance of power in Asia. Therefore, as long as South Korea holds strong, betrayal costs will be limited.

Summary. The United States should support the DPRK's economy and military. First, the military advantages of having North Korea as an ally are great, and the costs of a potential betrayal are low. Second, the costs of a future North Korean betrayal would be limited. The country is relatively small; its potential for overturning the balance of power is reduced. American support would not turn it into an overwhelming threat.

Due to the escalation risk, Washington may want to avoid 'strong' alignment. Since China would likely react violently to an open American challenge over North Korea, Washington may want to maintain a relatively low profile to avoid provoking Beijing, at least long enough to shore up Pyongyang. America should bolster North Korea's deterrent potential, but Pyongyang is already a formidable nut to crack. Therefore, Washington could avoid an open, institutionalized alliance in favor of more quiet support.

Based on that, 'thick' alignment appears best. Due to its unofficial, discreet character, thick alignment sacrifices some of the deterrence strength of strong alignment but avoids dramatic escalation. Nevertheless, North Korea already has significant deterrent capabilities, allowing this tradeoff. Meanwhile, tangible material support would seriously weaken Chinese ambitions without much cost in case of betrayal.

Comparing with the Yugoslav Case

US Interests in Yugoslavia and the Early Cold War

Thick alignment matches U.S. engagement with Yugoslavia during the Cold War. With Yugoslavia, American diplomacy successfully transcended ideology and allied with a former adversary to better confront a common threat.²⁷

Yugoslavia played a significant role in the European balance of power. It had a long border with the Warsaw Pact through Bulgaria, Hungary, and Romania. It also controlled Moscow's road to Italy and the Adriatic Sea. NATO suffered from the geographic separation of its two Southern Europe command's land theaters, Italy and Greece/Turkey. This impeded troop transfers from one theater to another. Hence, having Yugoslavia on NATO's side would have linked Greece with Western Europe, complicating Soviet war plans. A large country of around 20 million people, Yugoslavia was influential in the balance of power in southern Europe. Therefore, like North Korea today, Yugoslavia was a strategic asset to counter the United States' main rival.

At first, relations between the United States and Yugoslavia were unstable. Most notably, the Yugoslavs shot down a U.S. military aircraft in 1946, killing five servicemen. At the end of World War II, Yugoslavia intended to seize the Italian city of Trieste, thus risking war with Rome and the western Allies. However, in early 1947, the peace treaty between the victors and Italy created the Free Territory of Trieste, ended the war scare between Italians and Yugoslavs, and mended relations with the West.

Shortly after, Belgrade turned from an ally to an enemy of the Soviet Union. Yugoslavia freed itself from Axis occupation. Hence, it avoided the fate of Eastern European states liberated by the Red Army (which lost their sovereignty) and maintained an independent foreign policy. Its willingness to annex neighboring Albania and parts of Greece and Italy, support Greek communists, and build an independent military against Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin's advice displeased the Kremlin. Yugoslavia further angered the Soviet Union by forging an alliance with Bulgaria in August 1947 without Soviet approval. Although the Yugoslavs assured Stalin of their support, their decision to merge their military with Albania's led to an open dispute in March 1948. During the spring, relations worsened to the extent that Belgrade believed a Soviet invasion was imminent.²⁸ At first, the Yugoslavs contacted the French for military support, as Paris was perceived as more ideologically approachable than Washington.²⁹

The Soviet-Yugoslav Split: An Opportunity

Exploited

The Soviet-Yugoslav split confronted the United States with a dilemma. U.S. officials envisioned Yugoslavia as an asset against the Soviets, ultimately lessening the American defense burden; they “looked at Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey not as an area into which we should put forces, but as an area that we can find forces.”³⁰ The Truman Administration quickly saw that “in the crucial Central European theater, the subtraction of Yugoslavia’s thirty-odd divisions from the Soviet side of the balance sheet promised to lighten the Western defense burden appreciably.”³¹ The United States conducted studies on the Yugoslav military’s potential needs even before being formally approached by Yugoslav leader Josip Tito to be ready to support Belgrade quickly in case of a Soviet attack.³²

However, some feared that an open rapprochement would weaken the Tito regime. Indeed, “Tito never ‘accepted’ the United States, but as a realist statesman, he never dropped the U.S. card, this option, from his hand,” explained a Yugoslav diplomat; cooperation had to remain discreet.³³ Yugoslavia’s engagement with the United States is hard to explain by anything other than realpolitik motives, as opinion surveys show that the Yugoslav citizenry considered the Soviet Union, not the United States, as Yugoslavia’s best friend.³⁴ Moreover, the risks of escalation were real; the Yugoslavs worried that accepting American military aid would elicit a Soviet invasion. They only submitted a request for U.S. military aid in mid-1951 as Soviet pressure mounted.³⁵ To prevent Moscow’s wrath, Tito knew that “we cannot allow people to say, ‘this is an American tank, and these are the British cannons.’”³⁶

Conversely, American inaction would have left Belgrade isolated and weak against Moscow’s wrath. Washington thus opted to offer significant economic and military aid but in a quiet, non-institutionalized manner. In 1949 and 1950, aid indeed remained as discreet and low profile as possible and concentrated on the economy. Yugoslavia’s economic difficulties pushed the U.S. government to act decisively due to fears that the Tito regime might collapse. In February 1949, the United States allowed the export of goods of military importance to Yugoslavia. Industrial machinery with potential military applications

soon followed. The U.S. Export-Import Bank offered a \$20 million credit, the first installment of growing financial support. In late 1950, the Truman Administration asked Congress to pass a Yugoslav economic aid bill. Overall aid reached \$120 million in 1951, while military support amounted to \$310 million between 1949 and 1952.³⁷ Noticeably, the involvement of British and French representatives in the talks decreased Yugoslav fears of a Soviet backlash, as the greater number of countries involved would help deter reprisals.³⁸

Military support quickly grew. Signed in October 1951, the Military Assistance Agreement “included the Yugoslav Army in the Mutual Defense Aid Program, providing T-33A aircraft, artillery, machine guns, radars and electronic equipment. Thanks to the U.S. Army training, the Yugoslav Army transformed itself from a guerrilla-like force into a regular army.”³⁹ Already in 1951, Washington and Belgrade had an understanding of how they would behave and coordinate during a general war. The Yugoslavs agreed to let American aircraft operate from their airfields in wartime. This made it clear that Yugoslavia would fight alongside the Western allies in case of a Soviet attack on NATO.⁴⁰

In the background of its ‘New Look’ on the Soviet threat, the newly-installed Eisenhower Administration increased aid to Yugoslavia even more from 1953 onward. Despite Soviet-Yugoslav normalization after the death of Stalin that same year, America and Yugoslavia maintained close relations. Throughout the 1950s, Yugoslavia received well over 200 U.S. jet aircraft. Starting in late 1955, Washington offered Yugoslavia support to develop peaceful nuclear technology.⁴¹

U.S. policymakers also expected that military support to Yugoslavia would create a path dependency for Belgrade. Eisenhower underlined the importance of tangible military aid since “the recipient became dependent upon United States ammunition and spare parts, and it would be much better if Yugoslavia had that relation with us rather than with Soviet Russia.”⁴² After 1961, Yugoslav purchases of American weaponry dwindled as the domestic defense industry became competent enough to sustain the country’s military, and relations with the Soviet Union stabilized. Yet, still during the mid-1970s, Washington

trusted Belgrade enough to discuss selling it TOW antitank missiles, a relatively new technology at the time.⁴³ Yugoslavia's turn had further positive ripple effects. The Soviet bloc's only access to Albania went through Yugoslavia. Once Belgrade rebelled against Moscow, it became a buffer against Soviet power; when Tirana broke from the Soviet Union during the late 1950s, the Soviets were powerless to retaliate.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Policy Recommendations

The Yugoslav case resonates in several ways for today's East Asia. Supporting Belgrade was a low-cost way to redress the balance of power in Europe. U.S. Sen. Scott Lucas calculated in 1950 that "it would cost \$176 million per year to maintain one American division in Europe, while for \$38 million, [...] the United States could support 32 Yugoslav divisions."⁴⁵ Washington's core interest was not so much to transform Yugoslavia into a treaty ally, but rather to ensure that it remained independent from Soviet influence. In terms that could apply to North Korea, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Omar Bradley described the Yugoslav armed forces:

In the first place, if we could even take them out of the hostile camp and make them neutral, that is one step. If you can get them to act as a threat, that is a second step. If you can get them actively to participate on your side, that is even a further step and then, of course, if you had a commitment, where their efforts were integrated with those of ours on the defense, that would still be a further step.⁴⁶

Three policies grounded in the Yugoslav experience could push U.S.-North Korea relations toward 'thick alignment,' the preferable outcome for Washington.

1. **Discreet diplomacy.** Engagement with Yugoslavia started with discreet feelers and low-profile visits. This helped avoid a Soviet backlash and domestic embarrassment for both sides. For North Korea, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) would likely lead this process, as it did in kick-starting dialogue between

former American President Donald Trump and DPRK Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un in 2018.⁴⁷ Discreet, deniable contacts with North Korea should take precedence over high-profile meetings and public events. Material aid could flow in after these initial steps. However, Washington should eschew institutionalized security guarantees or deploying combat troops in North Korea, as this would likely precipitate a major crisis. Nevertheless, such escalatory steps may be taken preemptively if one considers war with China imminent.

2. **Upstream preparation.** American officials planned the best way to support Yugoslavia before serious talks even began. They notably tried to preempt what the Yugoslav military would need to resist the Soviets in order to accelerate the process, be ready in case of a crisis, and have a baseline for negotiations. An intelligence effort, probably led by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), should analyze North Korea's military weaknesses regarding China. It should offer detailed recommendations about what technical and human capabilities and weapon systems the North Koreans need most to defend themselves and propose ways to fix these weaknesses as soon as the opportunity arises. The Pentagon should earmark specific stocks of stored equipment for DPRK use and have a list of what North Korean units would need what kind of training, and how many trainers. For instance, North Korea lacks night vision gears for its soldiers and spare parts to make its aircraft fly. Washington should have a regularly updated contingency plan to identify and fulfill such needs whenever required.

3. **Use Third Parties as Facilitators.** Yugoslavia was initially wary of direct cooperation with Washington and contacted France first, a partner less likely to elicit a domestic or Soviet backlash. It also preferred including Paris and London in the diplomatic process, hoping that the collective strength of the transatlantic allies would deter Moscow more strongly than relying solely on Washington.

To kick-start normalization with North

Korea and reduce its dependence on China, U.S. diplomacy should encourage allies and partners to engage North Korea diplomatically, economically, and even militarily so that Pyongyang gains breathing space in relation to Beijing. India and Vietnam appear especially helpful since they already maintain working relations with Pyongyang. The Europeans, Japanese, and Taiwanese could also play a facilitating role, as their relations with Pyongyang are historically stronger.

Counterarguments

Before concluding, three potential counterarguments need to be addressed: domestic political costs, the importance of non-proliferation, and the risk to U.S. alliances in East Asia.

Domestic political costs would be negligible. Former President Trump directly met Kim and even briefly crossed the North Korean border. Yet, North Korea never became a major issue in American politics. It is thus unlikely that the current or a future administration would suffer much from engagement. In any case, the American citizenry usually pays limited attention to foreign affairs when voting, and the average American would probably not punish an incumbent president for engaging Pyongyang.⁴⁸ Polls suggest that most U.S. citizens now favor diplomatic engagement with North Korea.⁴⁹ In the Yugoslav case, too, engagement had little domestic political costs for the Truman and Eisenhower administrations.⁵⁰

Some may brandish upholding the norm of nuclear non-proliferation as a counterargument for not engaging with North Korea. First, there is little evidence that that norm matters much in explaining proliferation; states proliferate when they see a nuclear deterrent as both necessary and achievable. The norm does not greatly influence a state's willingness to start a nuclear program.⁵¹

Second, this paper does not argue for an unconditional or everlasting entente with North Korea. One day, China may decline to the extent that it is not a major competitor anymore. Complete denuclearization as a goal may come back once the Chinese challenge has passed, if it ever does. It will be far easier to convince the North Koreans to denuclearize after building amicable relations rather than in the current atmosphere

of enmity.

Third, Washington has a long tradition of accepting partners' nuclear proliferation when it aligned with American interests, as "Israel, India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons, but Washington chose to live with that so long as they didn't brandish their weapons."⁵²

Engaging North Korea will not break U.S. alliances with Japan and South Korea. Although DPRK-Japan relations are poor, Tokyo considers China its primary threat, not North Korea.⁵³ Washington would thus likely be able to get Japan on board easily. Since the 2000s, Seoul has generally been more eager to engage with Pyongyang than Washington, and most South Koreans favor peaceful coexistence with the North.⁵⁴

Furthermore, most South Koreans perceive China as a major threat, and the South Korean citizenry holds the most negative views of China in the world.⁵⁵ In addition, North Korea and China have lingering tensions about border delimitation which echo among the South Korean public. Hence, clever diplomacy playing on Korean nationalism would help create sympathy in Seoul to support Pyongyang against Beijing.⁵⁶ An American initiative to engage North Korea to counter China would thus resonate in South Korea without threatening the alliance.

The historical record points in the same direction. During the early 1970s, the Sino-American rapprochement deeply scared Seoul and Tokyo. Yet, U.S. engagement with China failed to break alliances with Japan and Seoul, and engaging China was a far more momentous bet than engaging the small DPRK.⁵⁷ To return to the Yugoslavian analogy, American engagement with Belgrade was followed by better relations among Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia, which used to be rivals but understood the necessity of security cooperation and the soundness of U.S. policy.⁵⁸ Per President Eisenhower, the U.S. relationship with Yugoslavia was "one of our greatest victories in the Cold War."⁵⁹ Engaging North Korea could become one of the greatest victories of 21st-century U.S. foreign policy.

Endnotes

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