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Encourage the Koreans to talk, and talk some more

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The two Koreas recently had a chat at Panmunjun, the truce village within the Demilitarized Zone. They reached an agreement. To talk some more.

That's the way it usually is. When there's a specific issue that must be resolved, real results sometimes are reached. But promises of future talks usually fall short. For instance, two years ago the two Koreas agreed to hold top level discussions: the North pulled out the day before.

Will this time be any different? The two sides chatted on Dec. 11, but failed to schedule any new sessions.

The negotiations were intended to address, said the joint statement, "issues that will improve relations between the South and the North."

But those issues, of which there are many, rarely have been susceptible to settlement via negotiation. Most problems on the peninsula grow out of the North Korean regime's determined misbehavior.

Topping the list for the South was family reunions, or "divided families," according to Ministry of Unification spokesman Jung Joon-hee. Visits are a fine humanitarian gesture, but irrelevant to the larger geopolitical conflict. North Korea hand picks only the most politically reliable.

Jung said at their Thanksgiving meeting the North focused on restarting tours of its Mount Kumgang resort. But they were suspended years ago after a North Korean guard shot and killed a tourist who wandered into a forbidden area. Pyongyang never apologized, let alone changed its policy.

Although it went unmentioned at the Thanksgiving meeting, North Korea also desires a resumption of aid, which was suspended (the "May 24 measures," as they often have been called) after the sinking of a South Korean warship and bombardment of a South Korean island in 2010. But the North never accepted responsibility for the first and justified the second as defensive.

There also could be discussion of reunification, but that will be difficult with the current regime in Pyongyang. Conventional arms control would be a logical topic, since the North has positioned its forces near the border to maximize their threatening effect, especially on Seoul, which lies within artillery and Scud missile range. But so far Pyongyang has seen little reason to drop its threats.

The most important issue is Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program. However, to believe that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un is prepared to negotiate away the military's most important and expensive weapon is to believe in the Tooth Fairy or Great Pumpkin.

Still, talks are better than no talks. As Winston Churchill observed, better to "jaw-jaw" than "war-war." Perhaps the best policy is to seek to expand North Korean contacts with the West. That should include the United States.

First, there is no reason to think the Kim monarchy (with communist characteristics) is likely to disappear. The regime has withstood famine, poverty, and the death of two dominant dictators. Even if the youngest Kim is ousted, regime elites have a lot at stake in preserving the system.

Second, historically the regime has been less confrontational when engaged diplomatically. That phenomenon suggests that the North actually desires engagement, and perversely is willing to threaten to get it. There's little reason not to respond positively, as long as expectations are kept low.

Third, change actually is occurring in North Korea. Private markets continue to spread, including for real estate. Moreover, Paul Tjia, a Dutch business consultant who works in North Korea, recently told NK News: "The country is really opening up. They want more investment and trade."

Most important, the North's economy has been growing. Cho Dong-ho, a professor at Ewha Women's University, recently argued that annual growth was likely closer to 5 percent than the 1 percent forecast from the Bank of Korea. Felix Abt, who co-founded a business school in the North, reported: "Poverty has dropped and, equally visible, a middle class has emerged."

Fourth, coercion has failed. As long as China refuses to cut off energy and food, the Kim regime is likely to survive. If the West is forced to live with Pyongyang's current rulers, it's worth considering another approach. Abt contended that in his experience "intense interaction can lead to many changes." He acknowledged fears of propping up the regime, but believed involvement "also helps transform it."

Rather than the gift that keeps giving, North Korea is the horror story that keeps playing. But attempting to ignore it isn't working. The U.S. should follow the South in addressing Pyongyang.

Expectations should be low, even nil. But society is changing within the North. When no other policy seems to work, why not give engagement a try?

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