



AT LARGE

Confronting an Unrepentant North Korea

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Just the other day the Kim Jong-il regime threatened to "wipe out" both the U.S. and South Korea if they started a war. Adm. Mike Mullen , chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, warned: "I'm not convinced that they won't provoke again." Another day, another North Korean threat.

The Korean Central News Agency constantly spews forth vicious epithets to little effect. But North Korea's uncompromising policy makes any negotiated settlement seem unlikely.

The so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea is perhaps the world's greatest tragedy, a misgoverned, impoverished, oppressed hellhole, with 23 million people subject to the whims of an unpredictable communist monarchy entering its third generation. At the same time, the DPRK is developing longer-range missiles and nuclear weapons, largely impervious to threats or rewards.

Regime change is the preferred strategy for some. But neither Kim nor his associates will voluntarily dismantle their system of oppressive privilege. War would be necessary, when even the costs of victory would be horrific.

Sanctions are the second best response for almost everyone, but so far the regime has been willing to allow the DPRK population to suffer whatever hardships result. Sanctions will not be effective without Chinese support. Yet China has been unwilling to take action to further cripple the North's already decrepit economy.

That leaves diplomacy. However, years of torturous negotiations between the North and the U.S., South Korea, and Japan leave little reason for hope.

The blame does not fall entirely on Pyongyang -- the allied powers have not always lived up to their promises. However, noted long-time Asian analyst Larry Nicksch writes, "North Korea's negotiating positions have hardened considerably since" the end of the Six-Party Talks in 2008. And the more advanced North Korea's nuclear program, the less likely the DPRK is to sacrifice the fruit of its manifold efforts. Indeed, the impending leadership transition will deter any dramatic change in policy.

Yet the status quo seems untenable.

The U.S. is being pressed to provide humanitarian assistance to the North. The chief victims of the Kim regime are North Koreans. At least a half million people, and perhaps many more, died of starvation during the late 1990s. Despite espousing a philosophy of "juche," or self-reliance, Pyongyang has regularly banged its tin cup around the world, collecting food assistance from China, the Republic of Korea, America, Europe, and the United Nations.

However, donors have tired of the North's continued belligerence and diversion of food to the army and party elites. The ROK and U.S. cut off aid in 2008 and 2009, respectively. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently noted Washington's continuing "serious concerns about monitoring" food distribution. The UN World Food Program has collected little money from other nations for similar reasons.

After a hard winter, floods, and outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease -- on top of the inevitable failures of central planning -- hunger again stalks the North Korean countryside. Official rations are being cut and, some claim, starvation looms. The DPRK took the unprecedented step of requesting that its 40 foreign embassies ask host governments, no matter how poor, for assistance.

In response, the WFP again is requesting donations. The European Union, citing "increasingly desperate and extreme measures...being taken by the hard-hit North Koreans," agreed to send \$14.5 million worth of food. Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter visited the DPRK and declared that to not assist the Kim regime -- which, of course, is largely responsible for its people's plight -- was "a human rights violation."

But the American and South Korean governments remain skeptical of Pyongyang's claims. Some Western observers believe that the problem is no worse than in recent years. In fact, the Kim regime may be exaggerating the problem in order to stockpile rice for national celebrations planned next year. Seoul's Unification Minister Hyun In-taek said "there seems to be some political motivation behind North Korea's recent plea for food aid."

In any case, Washington has good reason to say no. The aid may be humanitarian, but Pyongyang would see it as a political concession. Worse, the food would strengthen the government. High-level North Korea defector Kim Duk-hong recently told the *Wall Street Journal* that food assistance "is the same as providing funding for North Korea's nuclear program."

While consciously attempting to wreck the regime by starving its people is a dubious strategy for both moral and practical reasons, Western governments should not bolster Pyongyang either. In

fact, unconfirmed reports indicate that rations for the army have been cut and hunger has reached the army. Japanese journalist Jiro Ishimaru, who trains undercover North Korean reporters, observed that Pyongyang "used to put the military first, but now it can't even supply food to its soldiers."

Rations also may have been reduced in Pyongyang, where the party and bureaucratic elite reside. Moreover, the universities have been closed, with students assigned to work in preparation for next year's centennial celebrations of the birth of "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung. Until now, the nomenklatura appeared to have been largely insulated from the impact of the DPRK's catastrophic economic failure. Western food assistance risks easing conditions for the elite rather than the people of North Korea.

Washington also is being pressed to resume nuclear negotiations with Pyongyang. The North says it wants talks with the U.S. and South Korea, and has proposed another inter-Korean summit. The DPRK also is pressing for resumption of the Six-Party Talks, which include China, Russia, and Japan. China has proposed a three-stage process, beginning with bilateral discussions between the two Koreas, continuing with U.S.-DPRK talks, and then culminating in another round of multilateral Talks.

In fact, nuclear envoys from North and South met last week in Indonesia, though earlier bilateral discussions were less civil. One recent inter-Korean effort collapsed into absurdity when Pyongyang accused South Korean officials of begging for a summit and offering to bribe the North's negotiators.

Pyongyang recently hosted Robert King, the Obama administration's special envoy for human rights to talk about human rights. Moreover, last weekend the administration announced that the North's vice foreign minister would visit the U.S. to discuss renewed disarmament negotiations. But Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tried to sound tough: "We do not intend to reward the North just for returning to the table. We will not give them anything new for actions they have already agreed to take."

More hopeful was Bill Richardson, the former New Mexico governor and Cabinet officer, who recently visited the North and proclaimed that "I think there's a new pragmatism there." Leon Sigal of the Social Science Research Council also contended that the North is prepared make concessions.

However, the DPRK long has been willing to follow provocations with calls for negotiations and make promises which could be reversed. So far the process has yielded only dead ends. There's no reason to expect more today. Especially since Pyongyang's impending leadership transition inevitably will overshadow any talks.

Kim Jong-il succeeded his father after two decades of planning. In contrast, Kim only began the process of elevating his youngest son, Kim Jong-un, after suffering a stroke in August 2008. Although some Chinese academics with whom I recently spoke believe Kim Jong-il's health is reasonably good, he reportedly limited his activities on his most recent trip to China. In any case, no one believes that he has 20 years to manage Jong-un's rise.

Evidence of the rush to burnish the younger Kim's reputation is the suspicion that the North's bloody belligerence last year and recent rhetorical flourishes have been part of a campaign to

build a nationalist narrative around Kim Jong-un. Disarmament would run contrary to this effort.

Although Kim Jong-il appears to remain fully in charge, there is no guarantee that his succession wishes will survive him. Only two men have ruled the DPRK since it was founded in 1948. There must be a number of other figures who see their claim to leadership as superior to that of a chubby 20-something with no accomplishments.

Kim must divide power among a host of potential contenders to ensure that no one overshadows his son after his death. Kim cannot even trust his own family: he has two other sons, one in semi-exile in Macau; a younger half-brother, until recently the ambassador to Poland, now reportedly under house arrest; a brother-in-law, perhaps the regime's de facto number two but only an alternate member of the politburo; and a fourth wife/consort, so far with only a minor political role. Kim has little reason to take the political risks that would come from abandoning the nuclear program.

Indeed, Kim must placate the military to ensure its acquiescence to his succession plan. Creating a nuclear arsenal is the logical culmination of his "military first" campaign and he increasingly has elevated military officers in government. They are unlikely to favor giving up weapons which took so much effort to create.

Kim's successors are no more likely to favor disarmament. Kim's death may initially result in collective leadership with an inevitable power struggle. No one would want to alienate the military. And it would take time for any civilian who prevailed to amass the kind of authority required to order disposal of the military's most important weapon.

Some in the West remain hopeful, seeing the road to reform in Pyongyang running through Beijing. However, despite indications that some Chinese elites are growing more frustrated with the DPRK, the two countries' historic and geopolitical ties remains strong. While the PRC has strongly discouraged the Kim regime from making further military provocations, the Beijing authorities have been strengthening their economic ties with North Korea.

Chinese policymakers emphasize the danger of creating instability by pushing the North past its breaking point. Undoubtedly Beijing also hopes to win increased control over North Korean resources.

Equally important, though unstated, is China's desire not to have a united peninsula allied with America and hosting American troops on its border. In contrast, the current situation leaves the U.S. and South Korea constantly beholden to Beijing, seeking its aid in dealing with an irresponsible North.

So what should Washington do about the DPRK? It is best to assume that the North Korean system will survive for the foreseeable future. Despite periodic predictions of Pyongyang's imminent collapse, totalitarianism has proved resilient in the North. Even if power moves away from the Kim family the result may not be liberalization. Reform must come one day, but the occasion and timing could be utterly unexpected. Washington's best strategy would be to disentangle itself from any potential Korean conflict.

Protecting the ROK seemed necessary during the Cold War , but no longer. Pyongyang faces

annihilation if it attacks the U.S. The South surpasses the DPRK on virtually every measure of national power and is able to defend itself. The North's old war-time allies, Beijing and Moscow, would not support it if it started another conflict.

The U.S. still should be willing to talk to Pyongyang, but the U.S. should have realistic expectations. Discouraging North Korean recklessness and maintaining the peace seems possible; convincing Pyongyang to disarm likely is not. Pulling back militarily would reduce Pyongyang's security concerns and ease China's geopolitical worries. There would be a greater, though still low, chance of reaching a modus vivendi.

In the meantime, the Obama administration should leave aid to private organizations. Any food assistance risks buttressing the regime. Even aid advocate Morton Abramowitz of the Century Foundation admitted: "It is true that disastrous North Korean economic policy is the principal cause of food shortages and that no steps are currently being taken to correct it. It is also true that Pyongyang could divert monies intended to assuage the needs of its people to military and other purposes." In short, giving the Kim dictatorship food strengthens the forces of oppression.

As Washington steps back, the ROK should move further forward. Last month South Korean Defense minister Kim Kwan-jin observed: "Proactive deterrence means that if there is a provocation, we will respond very strongly." As well Seoul should. The responsibility for South Korea's defense must lie with South Korea.

After years of intermittent negotiations with the DPRK, the hope of peaceful denuclearization has ended up in a diplomatic cul-de-sac. While Washington shouldn't give up attempting to promote a peaceful transformation of the North, the U.S. should plan for a future with a nuclear North Korea. Which means there are no good policy options.

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