



Jaw-Jaw Versus War-War: Negotiating a Way Out of the North Korea Impasse

By: Doug Bandow – November 27, 2013

Jaw-jaw is better than war-war said Winston Churchill, who led Great Britain during World War II. Which is reason enough to hope that the interim agreement reached with Iran leads to a permanent settlement. And that even North Korea might eventually join the normal community of nations.

While prospects of peace with Iran appear better—though the road ahead remains long and rocky—the possibility of a similar accord with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea looks ever further away.

Despite recent talks between the U.S. and North Korea on restarting nuclear negotiations, the Kim Jong-un government has reactivated the Yongbyon nuclear reactor and begun new excavations at the Punggye-ri nuclear test site.

Moreover, Pyongyang recently detained an aging American visitor, Merrill Newman, poisoning any discussions before they start. Pyongyang routinely provokes its neighbors and the West, but there always has been some logic to its actions. Detaining Newman promises international criticism, undercuts support for engagement, and threatens a growing tourism industry.

The best overall approach to the DPRK is to lower expectations. Pyongyang has proposed nuclear negotiations “without preconditions” and apparently suggested a willingness to halt missile and nuclear tests. However, few observers believe that the North is prepared to give up its nuclear ambitions.

North Korea has conducted three nuclear tests and faces an alliance between South Korea and the U.S., the world’s premier military power, which stations troops along the DPRK border. Of course, the North’s response to these perceived threats inevitably pushes the Republic of Korea closer to America. But Pyongyang’s perceptions just as inevitably drive its own military policies.

Thus, Washington should take the Kim regime at its word when the latter opined: “The legitimate status of the DPRK as a nuclear-weapons state will go on and on without vacillation whether others recognize it or not.” The U.S. needs to recognize the North’s position de facto if not de jure.

Some would intensify sanctions in response. However, the Kim dynasty has withstood not only steadily tougher penalties but poverty and even starvation. Absent a dramatically tougher effort, backed by the Peoples Republic of China, the outcome of any new sanctions likely would be the same.

A better strategy would be to defuse the threat environment. The so-called Demilitarized Zone is the most heavily armed border on earth, yet Washington and Pyongyang have no means to directly talk with one another.

The first step is to loosen rather than tighten the U.S.-ROK alliance. The end of the Cold War has robbed the Korean peninsula of any claim to being a “vital” security interest for America. And the South’s rise—it now possesses an economy thought to be around 40 times the size that of the DPRK—has eliminated any need for U.S. military support. Washington should extricate itself from the Korean peninsula’s interminable controversies.

The second step is to turn the lead for security developments on the peninsula over to regional powers. The North’s neighbors, including China, have an interest in peace, prosperity, and stability. If they were unable to rely on the U.S., they would have to do more and act more creatively themselves.

The third step for the Obama administration is to deemphasize denuclearization since nuclear negotiations aren’t going anywhere. Indeed, a small North Korean arsenal is a problem much more for the region, including Beijing, than for America. Washington’s red line should be proliferation to terrorist groups.

Lastly, Washington should start small-scale engagement with the North, official talks followed by low-key diplomatic relations. An official relationship wouldn’t eliminate the dramatic differences between the two nations, but might help reduce dangerous differences by opening windows into each other’s societies and channels for contact, both official and unofficial.

Why, after six decades, not formally conclude the Korean War with a peace treaty? To the extent that the North genuinely fears the U.S., greater engagement might help defuse some potentially dangerous tensions.

Negotiation over such a document also would provide another venue for engagement, including South Korea and China. Talks even could include the most difficult topics, such as human rights.

Of course, nothing might change. But there is little downside to opening official discourse, something enjoyed by virtually every other nation on earth.

Today, Washington policymakers are fixated on negotiations with Iran. While the ultimate success of negotiations remain in doubt, a more stable peace at least appears possible.

Not so on the Korean peninsula. Frustrations with past efforts to variously conciliate or confront have led to little interest in new approaches toward the DPRK.

Washington should try a different approach. The Obama administration should pursue modest diplomatic rapprochement with the North. If civil discussions occur and official ties develop, the two governments could move onto bigger security issues.

In the meantime, Washington should emphasize Winston Churchill's jaw-jaw over war-war. If that reduced the possibility of conflict even a little bit, it would be a good deal.