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Washington, it's time to talk to North Korea

By: Doug Bandow
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North Korea has imprisoned one American since 2012 and announced its intention to try two other U.S. citizens recently arrested for “perpetrating hostile acts.” Having no diplomatic relations with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the Obama administration cannot even inquire as to the prisoners’ welfare. That’s part of the reason why the U.S. should open official ties with the DPRK.

A state cannot be wished away even if it is controlled by antagonistic forces. When issues between nations arise, it usually is best if the governments talk to each other.

Politics has long dominated diplomacy surrounding the Korean peninsula. Washington and Pyongyang never recognized each other. South Korea and Japan also do not have relations with the North. Throughout the Cold War the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China did not deal with South Korea.

But after the end of the Cold War, Russia and then China, Pyongyang’s most important ally, recognized the South.

America, South Korea and Japan still see the North as an enemy state. The North is building nuclear weapons, developing long-range missiles, conducting a confrontational foreign policy, and violating human rights.

But this bill of particulars also largely applied to the Soviet Union, with which Washington maintained official ties throughout the Cold War, and China, with which the Nixon administration opened relations. Refusing to talk with Moscow would have been grossly irresponsible because the two nations confronted each other militarily around the globe.

While Pyongyang is not a global power, its activities affect America. Which means there is much for the U.S. and North Korea to talk about.

Negotiations obviously don’t guarantee results. The Six-Party talks have yielded agreements. Bilateral discussions also have occurred outside of official diplomatic channels. Most of the deals ingloriously collapsed.

However, the lesson is not that ongoing relations are valueless, but that big agreements are unlikely, whatever the negotiating framework. For instance, ever fewer Korea analysts believe that Pyongyang is willing to give up its nuclear arsenal.

Nevertheless, secondary but still important objectives may be achievable. For instance, the North might be willing to freeze its nuclear production or draw back its advanced conventional forces.

These may remain unlikely. But they are more likely as part of an ongoing diplomatic relationship. Treating Pyongyang as a diplomatic equal would meet one of the North's longstanding demands.

Sitting down with North Korea might help moderate the regime's natural paranoia, and thus resistance to disarmament initiatives.

More regular discussions would help American officials better understand the Kim regime.

Routine contacts would allow talks to develop informally over time.

Of course, the U.S. might find itself disappointed on all counts. But even a negative result would be an important lesson for America.

The Obama administration should offer to talk with the North. Officially. Regularly. With no preconditions. Doing so might change nothing. But that would be no worse than the status quo.

And the results just might surprise.

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