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Can U.S., North Korea find common ground?

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North Koreans have formally ended their three-year mourning period for Kim Jong-il. By custom his son, Kim Jong-un, and the country now are free to move forward without hindrance from the past. How will they take advantage of their opportunity?

A small, poor nation, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea should be an international nullity, irrelevant to global affairs. Yet it again dominated headlines in the U.S. with the hacking of Sony and postponement of the movie "The Interview," featuring the assassination of the younger Kim.

Although the FBI is pointing its finger at Pyongyang, a number of online experts strongly doubt the charge. Whatever the case, this otherwise two-bit international player is at the top of the news.

For the last seven decades Washington has made North Korea America's problem. The U.S. initially had little choice since its joint division of the Korean peninsula with the Soviet Union led to creation of two antagonistic states.

But by taking on responsibility for South Korea's defense, Washington has thrust itself into the middle of the Korean conflict and subjected Americans to rhetorical barrages, financial demands, military threats, regional complications, and perhaps cyberattacks.

Washington should extricate itself from the Korean imbroglio while giving the North something to lose should it consider cyber attacks or other threatening behavior in the future.

The first step is to turn South Korea's defense over to South Korea.

American officials should also raise the prospect of a nuclear South Korea.

Paradoxically, at the very time North Korea looks more intransigent than ever, the Obama administration should indicate its willingness to initiate low-key diplomatic relations.

Switching course toward the North would open a small window into North Korea. Doing so also would test the regime's willingness to develop a more normal relationship.

North Korea is an international problem with no good solution. Washington should cheerfully, even eagerly, pass off responsibility for dealing with the North to its neighbors, including the Chinese. It's time the U.S. stopped trying to do everything, including dealing with Pyongyang.

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