



Why Washington Needs a New North Korea Strategy

By: Doug Bandow
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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.

However, the lesson is not that ongoing relations are valueless, but that big agreements are unlikely, whatever the negotiating framework. Ever fewer Korea analysts believe that Pyongyang is willing to give up its existing nuclear arsenal. The regime has placed its prestige as well as resources on developing increasingly sophisticated missiles. Kim Jong-un will not surrender his family's political dynasty.

Nevertheless, secondary but still important objectives may be achievable. For instance, the DPRK might be willing to freeze its nuclear production or draw back its advanced conventional forces. The Kim government might consider economic reforms to encourage foreign investment. The regime might even be willing to at least discuss, if not act on, human rights.

None of these may be likely. But they are more likely as part of an ongoing diplomatic relationship. First, the North long has been pushing for direct contact with America. Treating Pyongyang as a diplomatic equal would meet one of the DPRK's longstanding demands.

Second, sitting down with North Korea might help moderate the regime's natural paranoia and, thus, resistance to disarmament initiatives. A United States engaged in continuing dialog with the North would look less like a nefarious plotter against the North. Third, more regular discussions would help American officials better assess the Kim regime's priorities, willingness to compromise, view of U.S. initiatives and internal political shifts. Fourth, routine contacts would allow talks to develop informally over time, rather than be forced into a formal framework, which so far, hasn't yielded permanent results.

Of course, the United States might find itself disappointed on all counts. The North might remain obdurate and not take advantage of new opportunities to improve relations. But even that would be an important lesson for America. And even more so for China, which has pressed Washington to engage North Korea to lower tensions on the peninsula. Making a genuine effort to have a relationship with Pyongyang would strengthen a subsequent request by Washington for greater assistance from Beijing.

No doubt, critics would complain that initiating diplomatic ties was a “reward” for the North. And the latter might seek to treat it so, even though recognition would merely reflect standard operating international procedure. However, as the world’s dominant power, America could afford to make such a faux concession. Doing so would also give Washington another benefit to offer: expanded ties if relations develop smoothly.

Moreover, opening a small mission would be less embarrassing than having to periodically send Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, Bill Richardson or Dennis Rodman to the North to rescue jailed Americans. And the benefits of contact would outweigh the costs. Simply having a small window into North Korean society would be useful. Over time, something more might result.

Now is a propitious moment for Washington to move. Although the DPRK has been allied with Moscow and Beijing since it declared its independence in 1948, relations have rarely been simple with either big neighbor. Kim Il-sung ruthlessly purged pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese factions, and criticized the USSR over de-Stalinization and the PRC over the Cultural Revolution. Mao Zedong also opposed the North’s familial succession and opened ties with America, further angering Kim. The post-Cold War era has been particularly hard, with Moscow-Pyongyang relations virtually collapsing until recently, and Beijing-Pyongyang links mimicking a roller coaster ride.

The DPRK remains heavily dependent on China, which evidently makes the former uncomfortable. Indeed, one of the complaints against Kim Jong-un’s uncle, executed last December, was that he made unwarranted economic concessions to Beijing. With PRC-ROK relations improving—President Xi Jinping visited Seoul last week—the North has been looking elsewhere. It is talking to Tokyo about the sensitive issue of Japanese citizens abducted by the DPRK in the 1970s and 1980s. Additionally, Pyongyang is rebuilding ties with Russia; Moscow recently wrote off almost \$11 billion dollars in debt and increased oil exports.

Washington should offer North Korea another alternative. As the distant power that has never swallowed Korean territory, America is an attractive partner for the North. Critical issues divide the two nations, of course, but they do not prevent diplomatic foreplay. The results could be surprising. And even failure would be low-cost. Present policy is not working—so why not try something else?

More than two decades have passed since the Cold War ended, but you wouldn’t know it from looking at the Korean peninsula. Three different U.S. administrations have varied policy toward the DPRK from engagement to isolation and mixed threats with inducements. Nothing has worked. Today, Pyongyang is as diplomatically intransigent and militarily threatening as ever, but appears to remain politically stable. With missiles flying, rumors of nuclear tests circulating and arrests of Americans continuing, North Korea remains a disruptive international actor.

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