

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

North Korea Needs to Stop Acting Crazy

After the killing of a South Korean official who apparently was attempting to defect, Seoul announced that Kim wrote a letter saying he was “very sorry” for “disappointing” the South Korean people. But does that really clear up the matter?

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Yet again North Korea’s Kim Jong-un demonstrated that he is different from his father and grandfather. He apologized for a brutal mistake by his government.

After the killing of a South Korean official who apparently was attempting to defect, Seoul announced that Kim wrote a letter saying he was “very sorry” for “disappointing” the South Korean people.

What would be routine for any other government is an important step forward for Pyongyang. However, much more needs to be done.

Kim previously diverged from established North Korean policy with his commitment to economic development and diplomacy. With serious negotiating partners in Presidents Donald Trump and Moon Jae-in, Kim appeared poised to make a breakthrough agreement, reducing tensions, advancing arms control, and promoting economic development.

But it was not to be. Much of the blame falls on Trump and especially his officials, who sought full denuclearization before developing trust with or delivering benefits to Pyongyang. However, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea also is at fault. Indeed, the DPRK is its own worst enemy. Not just because of its ruthlessly repressive political system. The North’s insular government also operates in a bizarrely anti-social manner even when not to the regime’s advantage.

Such was the latest controversy over the shooting of the South Korean fisheries official who disappeared at sea. He had personal problems and apparently decided to swim to the North seeking to defect. Seoul reported that North Korean navy personnel then burned his body, presumably out of fear of COVID-19 infection.

Beyond causing a personal tragedy, these actions reinforced the DPRK’s image as a crazy state. And undercut efforts by the Moon government to improve relations with the North. Indeed, the timing could not have been worse. The incident occurred the same day that Moon spoke (via video) to the United Nations General Assembly. There he emphasized that “the Republic of

Korea has been steadfast in seeking inter-Korean reconciliation and is making relentless efforts to achieve denuclearization and establish permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula.”

Alas, the ROK has garnered little thanks from the North for doing so. Frustrated at Seoul’s perceived subservience to the U.S., Kim spent the last two years largely dismissing South Korea’s engagement efforts. Indeed, in June Pyongyang blew up the liaison building constructed by the South in Kaesong while tossing insults at Seoul.

The latest border incident almost certainly was the unthinking application of rules made more rigid from fear of a devastating pandemic. However, the ROK’s patience finally appeared to wear thin. Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha condemned the “shocking and inhuman act” and demanded an investigation and punishment of those responsible. After so much flagrantly unreasonable conduct, the North had no positive capital to draw on.

Kim, who recently exchanged conciliatory letters with Moon, apparently understood that he had a serious problem and responded accordingly. According to the South Korean government, the North Korean leader wrote to apologize for “an incident that will clearly negatively impact inter-Korean relationship.” Although he disputed the details—claiming the man refused to identify himself and sought to flee, and only the “floating material” was burned, the body being unrecovered—Kim admitted that it was a “disgraceful affair” that should not have occurred. Seoul explained: “Chairman Kim Jong Un asked to convey that he feels very sorry that instead of giving aid to our compatriots in the South who is struggling with COVID epidemic, we have given President Moon and our compatriots in the South a great disappointment with this unseen misfortune in our sea.”

The conciliatory gesture is welcome, but not enough. The event demonstrates the North Korean system’s deep flaws. Its inability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances undermines efforts by other nations to cooperate with the DPRK. This incident comes even after the North entered the international system more seriously than ever before, with multiple summits featuring Kim and the leaders of China, South Korea, Russia, and the U.S.

No doubt, previous members of the Kim dynasty believed that brinkmanship was an effective strategy against adversaries which desired to keep the peace. And a mélange of hysterical rhetoric, blood-curdling threats, violent actions, devastating potential won concessions, investment, and aid, especially from the ROK. Yet constantly inconsistent, thoroughly ungrateful, and seemingly irrational behavior proved costly.

Recent conservative governments in Seoul moved toward confrontation. Even more liberal administrations found it difficult to implement a conciliatory policy given predictable public skepticism of engagement. For instance, Moon has succeeded despite, not because of, his more pacific foreign policy views. He was elected in 2017 after domestic scandal felled his predecessor, Park Geun-hye, and divided the ruling party. Moon’s party triumphed in the recent National Assembly election because of its effective response to COVID-19.

In contrast, his efforts to engage the North have won only tepid public backing. Moreover, his clout and popularity are likely hemorrhage in the coming 18 months leading to the election of his

successor. A destructive rather than constructive DPRK would further impede South Korean policies which would be in North Korea's interest.

As for America, the bulk of the foreign policy establishment, and especially the many hawkish nationalists and neoconservatives, is already inclined against dealing with Pyongyang. Providing additional ammunition for confrontation is a perverse negotiating strategy. Even the liberal Obama administration essentially abandoned any effort to deal with the North. A possible Biden administration might similarly respond to DPRK provocations.

Moreover, such actions feed a broader meme held by the U.S. public. To the extent Americans pay attention to the North, they tend to view North Korean leaders as dangerous, irrational, even insane. Policymakers know better, but support for engagement suffers when the public perceives a danger of war—exacerbated in 2017 by the president's "fire and fury" rhetoric.

Thus, if Kim still hopes for progress on sanctions relief he needs to take a more positive approach toward both the South and U.S. He especially should strengthen ties with his nation's most persistent potential friend, the ROK, which also supports more flexible policies. It will always be hard for Moon or any other South Korean official to argue for a more liberal approach when the North's behavior routinely surprises and often shocks those Pyongyang is dealing with.

Obviously, some policy changes are more difficult than others. And only North Korea's Supreme Leader can approve and enforce significant reforms. However, he already has made significant changes—he proved adept at summitry and diplomacy, brought his wife on foreign trips, and charmed other leaders. At home he has emphasized education and science. North Korean diplomats with whom I've dealt are serious professionals, not ideological automatons.

Having turned the North into something more like a normal country, Kim should push deeper domestic reforms, which could have monumental international impact. For instance, improving human rights would most directly benefit the North Korean people but also would aid the DPRK's relations with other nations. Treating potential negotiating partners with greater respect would advance diplomacy. And regularizing state behavior—avoiding incidents like the latest imbroglio—would reduce opposition to engagement with the North.

The U.S., South Korea, and North Korea should move forward. They could start by formally ending hostilities and initiating official relations. But progress requires Pyongyang's cooperation. Simply acting like a normal country would be enormously helpful. The latest border incident demonstrates the considerable costs of the North's ostentatious weirdness. Kim can and should change that.

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