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Bipolar Pyongyang

by Doug Bandow

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North Korea appears to go through phases. Earlier this year the North engaged in several foot-stomping, screaming, angry tantrums—like the “unruly” child Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke of. Now Pyongyang is exhibiting sweet reasonableness and asking to talk.

But the Obama administration has said no. At least no negotiations outside of the six-party talks. U.S. special representative Stephen Bosworth explained, “because of the nature of this issue and its regional implications and its global implications . . . this is a problem that requires a multilateral solution.”

That’s true as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go very far.

The potential of a nuclear Democratic People’s Republic of Korea should be primarily an issue for northeast Asia. However, Washington has made it America’s problem. And the U.S. role is central in North Korean eyes. The administration should initiate bilateral talks with an eye to extricating America from this position.

Secretary Clinton should invite the DPRK to send an envoy to Washington. (Enough supplicants have gone to Pyongyang.) The agenda would be to develop the parameters for any bilateral talks. The administration should indicate that it is willing to discuss most any issue, but genuine negotiations could be conducted only in a multilateral context—if not the six-party talks per se, then in an ongoing, parallel framework.

The reason is simple: the North’s nuclear program, accentuated by Pyongyang’s predictable brinkmanship, is the principal barrier to improvement of the DPRK’s relations with the United States, as well as North Korea’s neighbors. In response, Washington should indicate that it is prepared to work with the other parties to develop a comprehensive program to promote stability, security and prosperity for the Korean peninsula. The solution must be both regional and consensual. Washington should indicate that it has no intention of imposing a solution on other nations.

During this period the administration should work with Seoul and the new Japanese government to craft a package that includes: a peace treaty, a nonaggression pact, phased U.S.-troop withdrawal, mutual diplomatic recognition, an end of sanctions, membership in international organizations, and bilateral and multilateral aid. In return, the North would agree to forgo nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, fully dismantle its existing nuclear facilities, relinquish all nuclear materials and accept intrusive inspections.

The need for the latter is even more evident after Pyongyang’s claim to be in the final stages of uranium enrichment. If true, that gives the lie to the regime’s lengthy denial that it possessed such a capability. In return for bountiful benefits from engagement, the DPRK must agree to a process that ensures no more unpleasant surprises for its neighbors and America.

Washington, South Korea and Tokyo should simultaneously work together to encourage more intensive Chinese involvement. With increasing pessimism in Beijing that North Korea will agree to give up its nuclear potential, the allies should suggest that the People’s Republic of China closely

coordinate its policy with theirs for one last serious attempt to resolve the nuclear crisis through negotiation.

In essence, Pyongyang's three antagonists would provide the carrots while its ally would wield the stick. If the DPRK chose to obstruct and obfuscate, it would demonstrate that it does not desire a diplomatic solution. In that case, Beijing should support—and, more importantly, enforce—an enhanced sanctions regime. China also should consider using whatever influence it has within the North to encourage more responsible behavior and/or better leadership.

To ease the PRC's concerns over the prospect of inadvertently sparking a North Korean implosion, the United States, South Korea and Japan should emphasize that the situation today is dangerously unstable, despite the fact that Pyongyang is in its manic phase. Should the result of Chinese pressure be social collapse, the three allies would contribute financially. Moreover, both Washington and Seoul should promise that there would be no American military presence in a reunified Korea.

To jump-start both bilateral and multilateral engagement, the administration should offer to initiate consular relations with the North. There would be no demand for a quid pro quo; rather, Washington should indicate that it favors allowing both nations to maintain official representatives in order to reduce the possibility for additional mutual misunderstanding. A move to full diplomatic ties would be part of the comprehensive package to be developed through multilateral discussions.

Of course, all of this might—and perhaps likely would—come to naught. Pyongyang enjoys obvious benefits as a nuclear-weapons state and might be unwilling to accept denuclearization at any price. But the prospect of a nuclear North Korea is an awful one and the potential consequences of a military “solution” are even worse, making an extra diplomatic effort imperative.

Such a coordinated campaign also should clear the international air, so to speak. If the DPRK refuses to negotiate, the allies would know that they need to prepare for a world in which the North has nuclear weapons. Only unpalatable options would remain, including attempting to further isolate the Kim Jong Il regime by interdicting its air and sea traffic, negotiating with the North for a verifiable nuclear freeze rather than rollback, and accepting South Korean and Japanese creation of an equivalent nuclear deterrent.

The organized attempt at a negotiated settlement would have a salutary impact in Beijing as well. China could no longer blame American intransigence for the failure of negotiations. The PRC would have to decide whether it was willing to accept an unstable, potentially failed state with nuclear weapons on its border, as well as the possibility of nuclear proliferation extending to the ROK and Japan.

A coordinated multilateral denuclearization effort is the best shot for resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis. But bilateral talks between Pyongyang and Washington may be required to initiate such an effort. With the North apparently prepared to negotiate, the Obama administration should seize the moment. Any resulting discussions won't deliver the solution, but they likely would help determine whether or not a negotiated solution is possible.

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