

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Korea's 'Cute Leader' Makes a Deal

Doug Bandow | March 20, 2012

North Korea wants to deal. Or, more likely, North Korea wants to be paid to deal.

Washington has reached another agreement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The North promises to—again—halt nuclear tests and uranium enrichment, and the United States will—again—provide Pyongyang with food aid. The so-called six-party talks, which also include China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea, are—again—expected to resume.

The result is likely to be the same. “A modest first step in the right direction,” said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, but nothing worth paying for.

It is better for the United States and Northeast Asia if North Korea is talking rather than shooting, as it was two years ago, when it sank a South Korean naval vessel and bombarded a South Korean island. However, Washington should have, at most, modest expectations.

Engaging Pyongyang

Although the DPRK appears to have decided to celebrate the centennial of the birth of founding dictator Kim Il-sung with negotiation rather than provocation, the North has given no indication that it desires to yield the only weapons which allow it to command the world's attention. Pyongyang also has kept up its standard confrontational rhetoric, denouncing ongoing U.S.-South Korean military exercises as a "silent declaration of war."

Moreover, even if Kim Jong-un, informally known as the Cute Leader, sits at the leadership table—he could be little more than a figurehead—he lacks his father's and grandfather's unchallenged authority. The ongoing political transition in Pyongyang makes it unlikely that anyone has either the desire or authority to challenge military priorities. After all, proposing the abandonment of the state's most important weapons program would not be a helpful strategy for consolidating power.

The United States should step back as it encourages resumption of negotiations. Other than following through with its promised food shipments, Washington should leave aid to China, which continues to keep the Kim dynasty afloat, the North's other neighbors and private NGOs. The situation facing the North Korean people is tragic, but it is a result of their government's policies. No one wants innocents to suffer for their leaders' brutal failures, but that's why Washington should not block private assistance. At least such shipments would offer no de facto political endorsement.

In contrast, the Obama administration should make clear that there will be no official reward without practical results. Former USAID head Andrew Natsios pointed out that tying aid to nukes tells the North Koreans that "without their nuclear weapons, they won't get aid." This reinforces the value of the nuclear program as a tool of extortion.

Moreover, aid strengthens the government and lengthens its rule. Even if assistance is not directly diverted, food shipments free up resources for use

elsewhere. Outside help will aid the new political order in fulfilling the regime's promise to demonstrate its power and wealth. Moreover, official assistance will be treated as a political concession, a reward for the regime's prior intransigence and continued control. The most humane policy would be to avoid policies which help preserve the system.

However, the change in personnel if not regime in the North provides the Obama administration with an opportunity to offer a replacement inducement: diplomatic ties. The end of the Cold War led Moscow and Beijing to recognize the Republic of Korea. Washington gains nothing by pretending that North Korea does not officially exist.

The United States should propose to open consular relations with the North. The two countries could start with a small mission, combined with Washington's desire to engage in regular conversations, willingness to expand relations if concrete results are achieved and hope to legalize trade if hostility abates. Pyongyang might pocket the gain and do no more, but American policy makers would still gain a small window to North Korean society.

Moreover, simultaneously increasing respect and decreasing threats would reduce the DPRK's undoubtedly genuine fear of attempted regime change. Unfortunately, the campaign to oust Muammar Qaddafi reinforced Pyongyang's natural paranoia by demonstrating that the West was willing to take advantage of a vulnerable pariah state which had given up its nuclear weapons as part of a deal. Opening ties also would test whether the new leadership wants to adopt a less confrontational course. No dramatic changes are likely in a new collective leadership, but a consensus might emerge in favor of reducing political tensions and expanding commercial ties. That possibility should be tested.

Balancing Regional Priorities

Most important, American officials should inform both the ROK and Japan that the United States plans to phase out its military forces in both countries, leaving them with responsibility for their own security. They should plan accordingly.

Both alliances were created in a different world—after devastating wars which left the two countries unable to defend themselves. U.S. policy allowed both nations to develop while shielded from aggression. Today, North Korea is a wreck, unable to feed its own people, let alone conquer its far stronger southern neighbor. The Soviet Union and China have been transformed, with little to gain and much to lose from war.

Moreover, the ROK and Tokyo have turned into major international players able to deploy whatever militaries they believe necessary. They should no longer be dependent on Washington for their defense.

That especially applies to the South, which enjoys a 40-to-1 economic advantage over the North yet spent a decade relying on American military support while generously subsidizing its supposed enemy. ROK president Lee Myung-bak changed course, but under public pressure he appears to be swinging back to conciliation if not appeasement of the North. In his New Year's address, President Lee said "Korea's national strength and its international standing have never been stronger or higher than now." Its defense posture and engagement policy should reflect that circumstance. Security cooperation among the three states would remain useful, but the United States should no longer be the front-line military state against either Pyongyang today or the People's Republic of China tomorrow.

Reducing America's role would help the United States adjust its force structure to match its straitened financial circumstances. Eliminating the U.S role as the focus of regional attention also would highlight the roles of other nations. Reaching a peaceful settlement on the peninsula would be primarily between South and North Korea. Encouraging the DPRK to avoid confrontation would

be a responsibility primarily of China. Supporting any new security and economic regimes that might result would be a task primarily for Japan and Russia, which are historically involved and geographically near.

Some in Washington might have trouble imagining a dispute which did not require America to play a dominant role. In fact, the world is filled with problems that would be best handled by regional parties with much greater stakes in the controversies. So it is in Northeast Asia, since the DPRK lacks a practical ability to threaten America, absent Washington conveniently providing twenty-seven thousand nuclear hostages in the South. Nor would Pyongyang have any reason to target the United States if it were not allied with Seoul.

American officials could still usefully attend any new six-party talks, but they should do so more as observers than as directors. Washington could work with the ROK and Japan to develop a “grand bargain” trading the North’s nuclear program for the West’s acceptance. Then the allies could present the idea to China, forcing Beijing to decide if it was serious in pursuing a diplomatic settlement to the North’s nuclear ambitions.

In an effort to create a more realistic attitude in both the North and the PRC, Washington should indicate its desire to be free of all unnecessary military obligations, which could mean closing its nuclear umbrella over South Korea and Japan.

Preparing for the Worst

If Pyongyang proves determined to upset the regional balance by creating an effective and growing nuclear arsenal, the United States might choose to step aside entirely, leaving the decision in Seoul and Tokyo about developing countervailing nuclear weapons. Further proliferation might not be the best outcome, but it would be better than proliferation limited to North Korea. In

short, the DPRK would gain less than it might hope, while Beijing would share with its neighbors the nightmare of a nuclear North Korea.

The latest U.S.-North Korean agreement is more cause for skepticism than celebration. It could lead to denuclearization of the Korean peninsula but is more likely to trigger a repeat of history: interminable talks with only minimal practical results. That would be better than a war but still would warrant only minimal effort by Washington.

The United States must shift responsibility for North Korea to where it belongs—on its neighbors. Maybe they can find an answer to the dilemmas created by a resilient Pyongyang. But if not, the ball will no longer be in Washington's court.

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