

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## *An Agenda for Negotiating with North Korea*

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I've [argued previously](#) that Washington's policies toward Iran and North Korea are futile, unsustainable and dangerous. U.S. leaders have painted themselves into a corner. The current strategy is unlikely to prevent either country from eventually having a nuclear capability, while guaranteeing that Washington will have a horrifically hostile relationship with two new, prickly nuclear-weapons powers.

The Obama administration needs to drastically alter that strategy, moving to normalize relations with Tehran and Pyongyang. And the administration should begin with North Korea, the easier of the two very challenging problems. U.S. policy makers [need to prioritize](#) their policy goals, decide what concessions they are prepared to offer North Korea and determine what concessions they can realistically hope to gain in return. Realism is especially critical regarding that last point. The notion that Pyongyang would abandon all nuclear ambitions was overly optimistic from the outset. Given that North Korea probably has processed enough plutonium over the past decade to build several nuclear weapons and has an active uranium-enrichment program, such a maximalist goal is now a pipe dream.

Instead of pursuing the chimera of Pyongyang's return to nuclear virginity, Washington should focus on getting the Kim regime to stop short of actually deploying an arsenal. That status of "one screwdriver turn away" from being a full-fledged nuclear-weapons power was the de facto policy of both India and Pakistan from at least the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s. It's hardly ideal, and—as in the case of those two countries—the implicit bargain can break down, but it's probably the best we can hope for from North Korea.

In exchange for that restraint, the United States should offer the following carrots:

- Express a willingness to sign a peace treaty formally ending the armed hostilities on the Korean peninsula
- Agree to establish formal diplomatic relations with North Korea, including the establishment of embassies and consulates in both countries
- Agree to rescind most of the current U.S. economic sanctions directed against Pyongyang and to support the repeal of UN resolutions authorizing international economic sanctions

Advocates of the status quo will inevitably argue that the United States would be making major concessions while getting very little in return. But it is evident that the current policy has not worked in the past, is not working now and has little prospect of working in the future. Given that sobering reality, we would not be giving up much at all.

Moreover, there are some potential benefits to the United States that, while subtle, are very real. For example, the establishment of an embassy in Pyongyang and consulates in two or three other locations would give U.S. intelligence agencies unprecedented opportunities to gather information about the ultrasecretive country. Currently, Washington must rely heavily (if not totally) on information provided by the South Korean, Chinese, Russian and Japanese governments. The reliability of such data is frequently uncertain, and those countries all have their own agendas, which, although they may overlap with America's, are hardly congruent.

Getting a better view of North Korea would also be a benefit to opening bilateral commercial ties. One should not overstate the potential, since North Korea produces few products that American consumers desire, and the DPRK is hardly the most appealing investment arena for American businesses. But even limited exposure to U.S. firms and Americans routinely traveling to North Korea and interacting with North Koreans can help create low-key incentives for reform.

The bottom line is that we have little to lose by adopting a bold alternative to the current strategy. When a policy has been in place for decades and is producing utterly sterile results, only the intellectually lazy should advocate staying the course.