

## U.S. Should Talk to North Korea, Whoever Is in Charge

By [Doug Bandow](#)  
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Power is like quicksilver. It often slips through the fingers of those attempting to grasp it. Who is in power in North Korea? Maybe thirty-one-year-old Kim Jong-un. Maybe someone else.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) continues its policy of mixing threats and entreaties. A high-level delegation visited Seoul to propose further talks and promote warmer relations. Days later, the North's troops were exchanging gunfire with the Republic of Korea's military, only to be followed by an inconclusive military meeting—and most recently, the apparent collapse of bilateral negotiations.

[Kim disappeared from public view](#) for forty days. His reported health problems—gout or ankle or foot surgery—should not have prevented him from attending important meetings and being filmed while sitting. And his return was not entirely convincing: Pyongyang only released undated still photos of a smiling Kim leaning on a cane while talking with other officials.

There've been no untoward troop movements or party conclaves in the North, though there was disputed talk of a [“lock-down”](#) restricting movement in and out Pyongyang. When visiting Seoul, the DPRK's number two, [Vice Marshal Hwang Pyong-so](#), seemed to enjoy some of the trappings of power previously limited to the supreme leader. The conflicting signs reawakened questions about the execution of Kim's uncle, Jang Song-taek, a year ago. Was it Kim's decision, or one forced on him by the military, which apparently had clashed with Jang over control of economic enterprises? There is no stability in the regime's upper reaches: In his nearly three years at the top, Kim has replaced upwards of half of the party's and military's top officials, changing some positions multiple times.

Whoever reigns, there is little reason to hope for nuclear disarmament. To the contrary, the North appears to be increasing production of fissile material, moving ahead on ICBM development and upgrading rocket-launch facilities. Who in Pyongyang has an incentive to abandon a weapon that causes the rest of the world to pay attention to an otherwise small, impoverished and even irrelevant nation? Why trade away an effective tool of financial blackmail that has yielded billions in aid from the ROK?

Finally, even a seemingly secure Kim, the “Great Successor” whose father concocted the North’s “military first” policy, would hesitate challenging the armed services by trading away its most important weapon. And if he is insecure—or merely a figurehead for the military—there is even less likelihood of a deal.

Yet there are signs of change elsewhere. Reforms in agriculture begun two years ago allow farmers to keep some of their produce, giving them greater incentives to grow crops privately. Moreover, the time of mass starvation appears to be over.

The [economy appears to be growing](#), with more consumer goods evident, especially in Pyongyang. For instance, high heels reportedly are popular, following the style of Kim’s wife, Ri Sol-ju. Sour political relations with the People’s Republic of China have not prevented continuing Chinese aid, investment and trade. The DPRK is not catching up with its capitalist rival, but North Korea also no longer appears to be sliding into an economic abyss. It also has turned itself into an exotic tourist destination, at least before apparently limiting foreign visitors out of fear of Ebola.

Moreover, Pyongyang appears to be adjusting diplomatic strategies yet again. After unsuccessfully attempting to use the plight of three imprisoned Americans to engage the Obama administration, the North [released Jeffrey Fowle](#), convicted for leaving a Bible behind while visiting as a tourist. DPRK media reported that his release came from Kim in response to President Barack Obama’s request. Furthermore, following Director of National Intelligence James Clapper’s visit to North Korea to secure the release of [two other American detainees](#), both Kenneth Bae and Matthew Todd Miller were released on Saturday. While their return to the United States was indeed worthy of celebration, [Clapper’s visit](#) was in no way a diplomatic one. Although, Kim’s agreeing to release the three detainees may indicate a willingness on the part of the North Korean regime to possibly cooperate on other issues.

North Korea’s UN ambassador, So Se-pyong, indicated that the [North was ready to return to the Six Party nuclear talks](#). In early October, Pyongyang sent a surprisingly high-ranking delegation, including the country’s reputed numbers 2 and 3, to Seoul, nominally for the Asian Games. The officials met with South Korean officials and proposed further talks, though the latter later foundered on the DPRK’s demand that the South stop its citizens from targeting North Korea with leaflets. The North pushed its “charm offensive” elsewhere, including negotiations to resolve disputes with Japan and multiple travels by Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong, including to Southeast Asia and Russia.

Nothing suggests that the regime is close to collapse. Kim, assuming he is in control, could rule for decades, health permitting. Even if he has been shunted aside by an oligarchical elite, the system could survive for years. Rising expectations sometimes spark political upheaval, but that seems unlikely in North Korea.

Benefiting the most is the elite living in Pyongyang, which has much to lose from any loosening of political control. The impoverished rural population cannot easily organize. Radical change could come from a North Korean Gorbachev, but the DPRK is far less open to foreign

influences. A military grab for power, assuming the politicians still rule, or social implosion are possible, but the system has proven its durability—surviving mass starvation, for instance.

In this situation, there is little to recommend the Washington's continuing policy of isolating the North. Pyongyang routinely denounces America's "hostile" policy (the regime recently termed America equivalent to a "[mentally retarded patient](#)"), a concern that undoubtedly helps shape Pyongyang's policy. In August, the DPRK's deputy UN representative, [Ri Tong-il, complained](#) that "No country in the world has been living like the DPRK, under serious threats to its existence, sovereignty, survival." Last week, the foreign ministry denounced any talks with America, "the enemy keen to overthrow it."

Of course, the North's leaders are practiced cynics and their claims cannot be taken at face value. But even paranoids have enemies, it is said, and North Korea—surrounded by wealthier and more powerful adversaries (United States, ROK, Japan) with but one increasingly irritated ally unlikely to offer military aid even in war (China)—has reason to want to avoid an American-led attempt at preemption. A more pacific U.S. approach might not change the Kim regime's calculus. However, it's hard to imagine a less threatening DPRK without changing America's approach.

And that could come in part from diplomatic dialogue, not policy concessions. Washington should offer to establish low-key diplomatic relations, perhaps a consulate. There'd be an American diplomat available when the next American gets arrested for one reason or another. Visas would be more available for anyone allowed to visit the United States.

More important, there would be a greater chance for bilateral dialogue. Of course, the regime could ignore any U.S. presence. That seems unlikely, however, given how vociferously Pyongyang has pushed for engagement. And such a facility would open a small but still useful window into North Korea, with Americans part of a small but growing diplomatic community.

Such a shift would be even more effective if coupled with policy changes that would be in America's interest in any case. Sanctions haven't shut the DPRK out of the world economy and won't do so as long as China remains open. In fact, North Korean trade, today [about 90 percent with China](#), has increased significantly over the last three years.

The U.S. budget is broken and there's no justification for subsidizing the defense of populous and prosperous allies. Moreover, the North fixates on the United States, because America is on its border.

Washington should bring home its troops, which most visibly threaten the North, especially when engaged in joint exercises with South Korean forces. The U.S. conventional presence is long outmoded: the South has around forty times the GDP and twice the population of the DPRK. America should announce that it is phasing out its current deployments, since the Korean peninsula's future should be determined by the Korean people.

Washington then could invite the North's authorities to reciprocate by pulling back advanced units, reducing tensions and initiating negotiations. Progress could be met with expansion of

diplomatic ties, membership in international organizations and relaxation of economic sanctions. (The latter would only work with Chinese support, and expanding sanctions actually has pushed the DPRK to increase trade with Beijing.) If Pyongyang genuinely desires greater international respect and lower military tensions, the United States should indicate its willingness to deal.

If Pyongyang failed to act, which would surprise no one, Washington would be no worse off. The United States could keep the minimal diplomatic relationship, and do nothing more. The South Koreans could decide how they want to respond. Then it would be much harder for them to blame America for the divided peninsula.

It also would be more difficult for Beijing to excuse North Korean misbehavior. For years, Washington has urged China to pressure the DPRK, but Chinese officials typically respond that America must reduce the factors driving Pyongyang toward confrontation. By making an attractive offer, the United States would be telling both Beijing and the North to put up or shut up. Moreover, a troop withdrawal would eliminate the prospect that Korean unification would result in U.S. troops on China's border, a Chinese nightmare that discourages Beijing's cooperation with Washington.

Even a more responsive North Korea is unlikely to be a particularly friendly actor.

Nevertheless, there is more hope for internal improvements in human rights and external talks over the issue if the international environment is less threatening for Pyongyang. In fact, the DPRK's foreign minister recently acknowledged the existence of "[reform through labor detention centers](#)," though he claimed they were meant to uplift wrongdoers. And the DPRK apparently has invited the UN's human-rights investigator on North Korea to visit. America's earlier refusal to talk to China gained nothing, while the famed Nixon opening helped create an environment more conducive to the reforms that emerged under China's post-Mao leadership.

Someday, North Korea will pass away. Until then, the country is likely to remain a mysterious challenge, unsettling an entire region, including its only nominal friend—China. Washington's best approach would be to extricate itself from confrontation and pursue dialogue, while leaving South Korea and Japan free to develop their separate policies.

Every strategy toward the DPRK so far seems to have failed. Anything adopted is likely to be only a second best. However, today, even second best would be a major step forward. It's time for Washington to try something different.

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