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Tough lessons in dealing with North Korea

By: Doug Bandow – January 7th, 2013

South Korea has elected a new president, Park Geun-hye. The vote was primarily about economics, but Park promised to reengage the North with a policy of 'trust building.' Now the North's leader has responded by calling for a reduction in tensions. Unfortunately, Pyongyang remains an impossible partner.

A year ago North Korea's 'Dear Leader' Kim Jong-il died. Kim's son, the 'Great Successor' Kim Jong-un took the helm of state.

Some observers hoped that the 29-year-old with the attractive wife would be a liberal reformer. Kim announced his determination to improve living standards. Reports circulated that Pyongyang is relaxing controls over both factories and farms.

So far, however, nothing much has happened. Now the reform dream seems dead with the so-called Democratic Republic of Korea's latest rocket test.

The Kim government insisted that it was merely sending a satellite into space. However, few observers believe that Pyongyang, with active missile and nuclear programs underway, had such limited objectives.

There are several important lessons from the latest incident. First, Kim Jong-un - whether as symbolic leader or genuine ruler - has maintained regime continuity.

There has been no improvement in human rights; to the contrary, Pyongyang has tightened border enforcement. So far the leadership has exhibited greater interest in increasing party control over government economic activity than in relaxing party control over private economic activity. The hint of 'glasnost' after the failed rocket launch in April has been followed with no evidence of 'perestroika.'

Second, there may be 'moderates' and 'technocrats' within the DPRK government. However, there is no evidence they influence policy. Any serious reform would threaten the positions, livelihoods, and even lives of a regime apparatchiks.

Third, despite his rhetoric about economic development, Kim Jong-un continues the regime's 'military-first' policy in substance if not name. Although the ouster of army chief of staff Ri Yong-ho may have reimposed party control over the military, the armed services continue to consume a prodigious share of the country's economic resources. By one estimate the missile program this year cost \$1.3 billion, more than 3 percent of the country's GDP.

Moreover, North Korea's nuclear program apparently continues. Rumors abound of a possible nuclear test. Even if the military has lost clout vis-a-vis the party, it retains its

predominant position vis-a-vis the people.

Fourth, China is unwilling to even try to restrain Pyongyang. Rising academic and public debate over the value of Beijing's alliance with the North has not been matched by any change in government policy. Indeed, Chinese investment in the DPRK has increased in recent years. The PRC apparently has decided that North Korea's survival is a vital interest, no matter how irresponsible Pyongyang's behavior.

Fifth, it does not pay to reward the DPRK in response to its threats. The Republic of Korea's 'Sunshine Policy' was a well-meaning but failed attempt to buy liberalization in the DPRK. For a decade North Korea pocketed food, money, fertilizer, and more without moderating its splanetic rhetoric, reducing its conventional threats, or slowing its missile and nuclear programs.

Indeed, a pattern developed of North Korea issuing threats and then temporarily sitting down at the negotiating table in return for money, food, energy, and other benefits. Unfortunately, Pyongyang has learned that it gains the most when it threatens the most. After doing the latter, it seems to be angling for benefits to talk.

It is time for a change. Park should confront the DPRK without illusion. Attempting to reopen communication may be worth a try, but she should expect few results.

The North Koreans may be separated brothers and sisters, but the North's leadership is ruthless and brutal. The only policy that Pyongyang respects is toughness - a stronger military, better preparedness, and no subsidies. If South Koreans prefer to go soft, that is their choice, but they should accept the consequences.

Washington should treat the North as East Asia's problem. The ROK can defend itself; American troops should come home. Deterring Pyongyang should become South Korea's responsibility. The U.S. should focus on nonproliferation, warning of overwhelming retaliation should North Korea transfer critical materials or processes to terrorist groups.

Finally, China should recognize its long-term interests: stability on its border, reduced threat of conflict, end of nuclear proliferation that could spread to South Korea and Japan, fewer desperate refugees crossing the Yalu, increased trade with a wealthier united Korea, and improved claim to regional leadership. All would be advanced by transforming if not ending the Kim family dictatorship.

The DPRK remains an enduring problem. The time for illusion is over. Kim Jong-un appears to be anything but a serious reformer.