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Political Books: U.S. engagement with N. Korea 'viable'

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North Korea says it wants to deal, but even the Chinese are no longer confident that the nuclear crisis can be resolved diplomatically. Does any basis remain for engagement? Yes, reply the contributors to "Engagement With North Korea."

Editors Sung Chull Kim of the Hiroshima Peace Institute and David C. Kang of the University of Southern California note that despite intense debate over policy toward Pyongyang, "there has been little sustained effort either to explore the theoretical logic of engagement or to assess whether or not - and if so in what ways - engagement has worked on the Korean Peninsula." They conclude that "engagement in general is a viable alternative to coercive strategies for inducing North Korean cooperation."

But nothing is simple with the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

U.S. engagement has been controversial since the Clinton administration negotiated the Agreed Framework in 1994. Youngshik D. Bong of American University doubts that Washington's "staged engagement strategy," that is, "the tit-for-tat or action-for-action pattern," will succeed. He contends that "nuclear weapons may have become too valuable for Kim Jong Il's regime to trade away under the principle of simultaneous reciprocity." While the overall deal might be worth making, the specific rewards for individual denuclearization steps might not be sufficient.

Moreover, the system makes it hard to unite surrounding states behind U.S. objectives. Mr. Bong notes: "Any failure of a staged engagement will not be enough to convince all the members of the engagement coalition that every opportunity to resolve the nuclear issue through engagement has been exhausted. They might still disagree whether the time has come to turn to coercive methods." Mr. Bong instead argues "that the United States must adopt a full-engagement strategy and make a grand bargain with North Korea if it is to achieve complete denuclearization peacefully."

Mr. Bong's argument is strong, but what if Pyongyang proves unwilling to yield its nuclear weapons under any circumstances? Moreover, will Kim Jong-il or anyone else be willing and able to force the military to drop the program in the midst of a leadership transition? "Full-engagement" is worth pursuing, but Washington and the North's neighbors should simultaneously prepare for the strategy's failure.

The role of the People's Republic of China, too, is critical. Stephan M. Haggard of the University of California at San Diego and Marcus Noland of the Institute for International Economics review Pyongyang's economic relationships and find that capital inflows have been rising since 2005, largely from South Korean aid and Chinese trade. Mr. Haggard and Mr. Noland emphasize that "sanctions are not likely to be effective in the absence of coordination."

However, such coordination is unlikely because China's objectives are not the same as those in Washington or Seoul.

Argues Fei-Ling Wang of the Georgia Institute of Technology: "Beijing prefers the continued survival of [North Korea] for its political and strategic needs." Although "Nominally supporting Korean unification, [China] seeks to maintain the political status quo and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula," he adds.

It still might be possible to recruit Beijing in a more coordinated campaign against North Korea, but the United States and its allies would have to persuade China that it is in the latter's interest to squeeze Pyongyang - no easy task.

Seoul's perspective, too, differs from Washington's. For most of the past decade, South Korea engaged in the "Sunshine policy," in which economic engagement, Sung Chull Kim writes, "was intended to buy peace, that is, to use economic tools for achieving security objectives." Although President Lee Myung-bak, elected in December 2007, has adopted a tougher stance toward the North, Mr. Kim observes "that the new administration has tried to maintain a core element of the engagement, particularly the Kaesong Industrial Complex project. The main elements of the engagement still survive in spite of the recent administration change."

Success of this approach has been limited. Concludes Charles K. Armstrong of Columbia University: "If engagement and 'Sunshine policy' were intended to fundamentally change North Korea in the near term, the policy is clearly overly ambitious. This does not mean, however, that the alternative would have been any better. Coercion and pressure historically have done little to change North Korean behavior."

Russia's role in peninsula affairs has been modest in recent years and is unlikely to change. Japan's position is more significant, but, as Jung Ho Bae of the Korea Institute for National Unification and Sung Chull Kim point out, Tokyo has been essentially AWOL, focused, for domestic political reasons, on forcing North Korea to account for Japanese citizens kidnapped over the years. Japan's new government should rethink Tokyo's stance.

Mr. Kang's concluding essay presents the most fundamental argument for engagement: the lack of a viable alternative. "In large part, engagement was eventually arrived at when it became clear that coercive strategies were unlikely to succeed, and were unlikely to gain the support of critical actors," he writes. That remains the case today.

Nevertheless, there are caveats. As Mr. Armstrong puts it, "[C]ontinued engagement, but with lower and more realistic expectations of engagement's effect on North Korea's near-term behavior, would be the most prudent policy." So would be preparing for the possible - or more realistically, likely - failure of negotiation.

"Engagement with North Korea" reminds us why diplomacy is the preferred strategy in dealing with Pyongyang. However, the contributors offer no guarantees about the likely success of such an approach. Unfortunately, the problem of North Korea is not likely to be resolved any time soon.

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