

Engaging North Korea

Mel Gurtov

Presentation at the NCNK Meeting of May 20, 2014, Portland, Oregon

The Problematic Environment for Engaging North Korea

For a number of years, I and many other specialists on North Korea have urged the United States and other governments to engage that country. Through various confrontations over nuclear weapon and missile tests, name-calling, and on-again off-again talks in both multilateral and bilateral settings, we have clung to the view that only engagement holds out hope of settling the nuclear issue (or at least stopping North Korea's further production of nuclear weapons) and preserving some degree of access to the beleaguered North Korean people. We were well aware of the North Korean gulag—the secret network of camps, the stories of torture and killings, the arbitrary arrests, the heroic efforts to escape the country. And we were naturally disturbed by the draconian nature of the Kim dynasty's rule—disturbed enough to be fairly confident that it was going to be around for a long time, despite the cyclical expectations in Washington and elsewhere of the regime's imminent demise.

The report in February of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea presents a searing indictment of that regime's widespread and systematic repression of its citizens. Making the case for engagement is now an even greater challenge. And yet I will make it here—aware not only that the North Korean leadership is guilty of the most egregious crimes against its own people, but also that in the present political climate in the US, engaging the North hasn't a ghost of a chance of being adopted in the White House or getting majority support in Congress. Moreover, Japan's current leadership would almost certainly oppose a US engagement effort, and the Park Geun-hye administration in Seoul would probably insist on close coordination between it and the US to guard against “surprises.” Only China would probably favor US engagement of the DPRK. For the US, engaging Iran is one thing—and that story is hardly over—but when it comes to North Korea, there is no constituency such as Iran has for promoting talks and perhaps arranging a package deal. And while Iran has its own infighting among top leaders, North Korean politics since the execution of Jang Song-thaek has left analysts unsure of its implications for regime stability in Pyongyang, not to mention the usefulness of talking with Kim Jong-un.¹

Getting Unstuck

“Engaging” and “engagement” are much used, and much abused, terms. Most often, they are synonyms for *contact* or *involvement*. So let me be clear on definitions, since when I propose that the US engage North Korea, I have a consistent strategy in mind. By *engagement* I mean:

a process that involves reaching out to an adversary in ways that may catalyze new directions for policy. The purpose of engagement, therefore, is to create an environment conducive to policy change on both sides by focusing on joint (as

¹ See the special issue of *Global Asia*, vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2014).

well as unilateral and multilateral) actions that will move the parties away from destructive conflict. To be effective, however (i.e., meaningful to the other side), engagement should be undertaken strategically—as a calculated use of incentives with expectation of *mutual* rewards, namely in security and peace. And it should be undertaken in a spirit of mutual respect and with due regard for sensitivity in language and action.

David Sanger recently reported in the *New York Times* that Obama’s North Korea specialists feel “stuck” on where to go next with North Korea.² They believe they have tried or explored every option for eliminating its nuclear weapons, only to watch as Kim Jong-un invests more in weapon and missile refinement and new strategies (such as mobile missile launchers) for maintaining secrecy. If Sanger is correct, Obama’s advisers accept the failure of “strategic patience.” But what they haven’t tried is a true engagement strategy. “Strategic patience”—and NCNK’s proposal of “strategic shaping,” I must add—do not amount to an engagement strategy. One finds frequent official reference to “engaging” North Korea—for example, by Deputy Secretary of State William Burns on April 8.³ But what Washington offers is not engagement but *sticks-and-carrots*: *If North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons*, the US will have dialogue with it. North Korean denuclearization is the US *price* for deeper contact, which may or may not amount to serious engagement. Until North Korea yields on nuclear weapons, then, the US will continue seeking to contain and undermine it through sanctions, military maneuvers, and alliance pressure. In Burns’ words, “While we maintain our pressure on North Korea, we also continue testing the potential for diplomacy.”

Engaging North Korea should not be exclusively about North Korean denuclearization. It *should* be about enhancing security for all parties with interest in the Korean peninsula, such that nuclear weapons become irrelevant and useless for strategic or political purposes. To get to that conclusion requires that serious thought be given to three questions: First, *why are alternatives to current policy necessary and urgent*, since that policy has clearly failed to change North Korean behavior or priorities? Second, *why would engagement be in North Korea’s interest?* Third, *what incentives* might prompt North Korea to stop its nuclear weapon and missile programs, and reopen the country to international inspection? In short, we must ask, as Walter C. Clemens, Jr. has asked in his book: How do we get to yes with North Korea?⁴

In a nutshell, I think the case for persisting in finding engagement opportunities with North Korea comes down to six considerations. First, it has at least several nuclear weapons and is now widely rumored to be restarting production of more. More nukes can only add to strategic instability and the danger of a terrible miscalculation. The longer the US persists in making any form of engagement dependent on North Korea’s denuclearization, the more determined North Korea will be to test and refine its nuclear weapons and their delivery systems. Second, every time North Korean leaders feel threatened or ignored, they undertake a weapons test or other provocative action. Third, China’s view of North Korea has changed; it has come to regard the Kim regime as a strategic liability, though not to the extent of dumping it altogether or consistently carrying out UN-approved sanctions. Still, China’s changed attitude presents an

² See www.nytimes.com/2014/04/25/world/asia/wrong-guesses-about-north-korea-leave-us-struggling-to-adjust.html?ref=world.

³ Text at www.asiasociety.org/policy-institute/transcript-amb-william-j-burns-asia-society-policy-institutte-launch.

⁴ Clemens, *Getting to Yes in Korea* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2010).

opportunity for creative multilateral diplomacy.⁵ Fourth, as the former South Korean president Kim Dae-jung argued in crafting his “Sunshine policy,” greater security for the North actually promotes greater security for the South. Fifth, abandoning engagement strengthens North Korea’s military and forecloses opportunities for credible dialogue with leaders there who want to reduce tensions and gain concessions from the US and others.

Sixth, engagement increases opportunities for direct contact with the North Korean people and lower-level officials. We have many concrete examples of how appreciative these Koreans are when they receive meaningful help, such as in medical supplies and training, wind and solar power generation, fisheries, apple orchards, and scientific and academic exchanges. Focusing on young people, as for example the Pyongyang Project does (www.pyongyangproject.org/about/manifesto.html), is especially important. Someday, the work of NGOs may transform North Korea’s political system and facilitate peaceful Korean unification. That is why a new US approach to North Korea based on an engagement strategy is so vital: It would provide a framework of support for the critical projects that NGOs carry out.

Consider what it means when we (and I include the European Union, Japan, and South Korea) reject engagement and continue the approach of insisting that North Korea must first eliminate its nuclear option before serious negotiations can get underway. North Korea will add to its nuclear weapon arsenal, and encourage influential figures in South Korea and Japan to consider having an arsenal of their own. North Korea will carry out more nuclear and missile tests, and will keep selling weapons components to militant groups and governments. It will create armed incidents with the ROK that will compel a violent response. It will crack down even harder on its population, in search of “enemies of the state” who have cell phones or listen to South Korean broadcasts. It will bar or greatly limit NGO activities even if they offer valuable assistance. It will embolden the most hawkish elements in the North Korean leadership, providing them with evidence that more nukes provide the only real security against an untrustworthy America.

Why would the North Korean leaders be interested in a serious US engagement proposal? I suspect that North Korea is just as tired of talk for talk’s sake as we are; it too won’t “buy the same horse twice.” The challenge, however, is not about buying but about selling: How to reach agreement on the “horse’s” fair selling price. For Pyongyang, that means no denuclearization without prior compensating incentives. In a word, *engagement must be seen in Pyongyang as strengthening regime and state survival*. North Korea would therefore most likely be interested in a US (or US-ROK) proposal that would provide some assurance against US designs to bring about regime change; that would enhance North Korea’s legitimacy as an independent socialist state—meaning US diplomatic recognition in particular—thus also preventing absorption by the South; that would provide international guarantees of North Korea’s security; that would ease and eventually end sanctions; that would at worst *warehouse* the North’s nuclear weapons until the terms of a new agreement are largely fulfilled, thus helping satisfy the DPRK’s military; that

⁵ Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai complained about [Washington demands](http://www.defensenews.com/article/20140410/DEFREG03/304100035/Envoy-US-has-Given-China-Mission-Impossible-North-Korea?odyssey=nav%7Chead) that his country do more to pressure Pyongyang into halting its atomic arms development or contend with U.S. repercussions for not doing so, Agence France-Presse reported April 10 (www.defensenews.com/article/20140410/DEFREG03/304100035/Envoy-US-has-Given-China-Mission-Impossible-North-Korea?odyssey=nav%7Chead). “There is one thing that worries me a little bit, and even more than a little bit, is that we’re very often told that China has such an influence over the DPRK and we should force the DPRK to do this or that,” the diplomat said in remarks at a U.S. Institute of Peace event. “Otherwise the United States would have to do something that would hurt China’s security interests,” Cui said. “You see, you are giving us a mission impossible.”

would pave the way for longterm development assistance, increased trade and investment, and short-term food and fuel aid; that would eliminate the nuclear-weapon option for South Korea and Japan; and that would reduce dependence on China.

Two Proposals

If these considerations are valid, I offer two possibilities for multilateral diplomacy, with the understanding that Track II and III efforts are essential components of an engagement strategy.

The first is revival of six-party talks *without preconditions* and with faithfulness to previous six-party and North-South Korea joint declarations—in particular, the principle contained in the September 2005 Joint Statement of “commitment for commitment, action for action.” At a new round of talks, the US and its partners should present a package that, in return for verifiable steps to neutralize if not eliminate North Korea’s nuclear arsenal, provides the North with security assurances, a proposal for ending the Korean War and signing a nonaggression pact with big-power guarantees (with China on board), and meaningful economic assistance from both NGOs and governments. The package should be joined to replacing threats with language and actions, such as high-level direct dialogue, that indicate sensitivity to issues of face and status. As two distinguished South Korean experts on North Korea have written, one serious deficiency of most Western writing on the North is that it completely ignores its “obsession” with “supreme dignity” and national pride. Saving face and gaining status recognition are thus quite important explanations of the North’s provocative behavior and search for a deterrent. Finding ways to isolate and punish Pyongyang may seem perfectly logical responses to its missile and nuclear tests and other actions, but they are not likely to bring it to the table for serious talks.⁶ On the other hand, if US diplomats were to place denuclearization in the context of fulfilling Kim Il-sung’s and Kim Jong-il’s “last wishes,” that might be the kind of face-saving approach that would appeal to Kim Jong-un.⁷

Alternative to a return to the Six-Party Talks is creation of a Northeast Asia Security Dialogue Mechanism (NEASDM).⁸ We might recall that such a group was anticipated in the final statements of the Six-Party Talks, and that South Korea’s President Park has proposed a similar peace initiative. In the absence of honest brokers for disputes in Northeast Asia, the NEASDM can function as a “circuit breaker,” able to interrupt patterns of escalating confrontation when tensions in the region increase—as they are now. But the SDM would not be riveted on North Korean denuclearization. It would be open to a wide range of issues related to security in the broadest sense, such as environmental, labor, poverty, and public health problems; a code of conduct to govern territorial and boundary disputes; military budget transparency, weapons transfers, and deployments; measures to combat terrorism and piracy; creation of a nuclear-weapon free zone (NWFZ) in all or part of Northeast Asia; and ways to support confidence building and trust in the dialogue process itself. Normalization of relations among all

⁶ Moon and Ildo Hwang, “Identity, Supreme Dignity, and North Korea’s External Behavior: A Cultural/Ideational Perspective,” *Korea Observer*, vol. 45, No. 1 (Spring, 2014), pp. 1-37.

⁷ See Tae-ho Kang, “North Korea Inches Toward Negotiations on Its Nuclear Ambitions,” *Global Asia*, vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring, 2014), pp. 58-67.

⁸ See Mel Gurtov, “Averting War in Northeast Asia: A Proposal,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 9, Issue 2, No. 2, January 10, 2011, www.japanfocus.org.

six countries should be a priority; full recognition of the DPRK by the United States and Japan costs nothing but is an important incentive for meaningful North Korean participation.

How might the NEASDM actually work? First, all six countries in the 6PT should be members, but no others, although other countries or organizations might be invited to participate for a specific session. *If North Korea rejects membership*, the group should nevertheless go on with its work. Second, the NEASDM should be institutionalized, perhaps situated in Beijing, with a commitment to meet several times a year at regular intervals regardless of the state of affairs in the region—but with the provision that any of the parties can convene a meeting in a crisis. Third, there should be an understanding among the member-states that the NEASDM meets whether or not all parties are willing to participate so that a boycott by one party cannot prevent the group from meeting. Fourth, the NEASDM's agenda should be unrestricted; the members should be prepared to discuss any issue that any one of them believes is important.

A NEASDM would bring decided advantages to each party. For example, North Korea would gain diplomatic recognition (and thus added legitimacy), access to long-term economic development assistance, and the potential for security guarantees by the major powers sufficient for it to eliminate its nuclear weapons, if not immediately then later. But all other parties would also gain from security and stability on the Korean peninsula. And a successful regional institution would provide a much needed boost to development of a regional identity.

Conclusion

Setting conditions for acceptance of North Korea into the “community of nations” has not worked and will not work—certainly not with a militantly nationalist leadership that is beset by profound economic problems at home and abroad has only faithless friends and implacable enemies. To be sure, engagement of the North does not guarantee its good behavior or friction-free interaction; but we should seriously explore what North Korean officials have long insisted, that if the US abandons its “hostile policy,” the nuclear issue and much else can be resolved. We should *test* that view, one step (and one incentive) at a time.