



North Korea: 20 Years of Solitude

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With the American people thirsting for a new foreign policy, transcending the aggrieved, insular doctrines of “regime change,” “pre-emptive war” and the “global war on terror,” a breakthrough might be found in a most unlikely place—the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. North Korea’s alienation from the world community is a grave threat to peace in East Asia. But with the right kind of American leadership, North Korea can be coaxed back into concord with its Asia-Pacific neighbors. The new Obama administration has a chance to make history by ending the 60-year conflict that divides the Korean peninsula, and reversing the two decades of solitude that has exiled an entire nation from the global community.

After 20 years, it is time to acknowledge that the conventional strategies—belligerent quarantine and ambivalent engagement—have failed to achieve positive outcomes for the United States, East Asia, or the North Korean people. America is now at a crossroads of opportunity to reformulate our basic political strategy and alter the underlying nature of U.S.-North Korean relations—as opposed to repeating the pendulum swings of the Bush-Clinton-Bush years. However disagreeable, the leadership in Pyongyang is a reality. Diplomatic

progress will only take place once the reality of the Kim Jong-il regime is accepted as the starting point of change.

Failed Foreign Policy

Before making history, we need to look at where history has brought us so far. The current framework for dealing with North Korea evolved back in the late 1980s in the wake of two game-changing developments: the end of the Cold War and the birth of the North Korean nuclear weapons program. The fall of the Soviet Union, combined with successful capitalist transitions across East Asia and Eastern Europe, dealt a crushing blow to the already crippled North Korean economy—a relic of unrepentant communism. The Free World’s victory over communism lulled many in the West into a complacent view that the North Korean political and economic system would be overrun by the “end of history.” Many assumed it was simply a matter of time before the North Korean domino tumbled and fell.

But other observers rejected such Whiggish confidence in the post-Cold War moment. North Korea, particularly when threatening to go nuclear, became the epitome of the rogue regime and pariah state, the embodiment of terror and evil. Whereas the “end of history” paradigm assumed that

time would do the work of diplomacy, the “axis of evil” rubric placed North Korea outside diplomacy, and by extension, history itself. Only military intervention by “modern” outside nations could remove the “pygmy” of Pyongyang, as George W. Bush tellingly called Kim Jong-il.

On the basis of this end-of-the-world scenario, the North Korea policies of Bush 41, Bill Clinton, and Bush 43 oscillated along a single spectrum. At the hard end was the quarantine approach, sanctioning and isolating Pyongyang in the hopes of inducing “regime change.” On the soft end of the spectrum was an ambivalent form of engagement, focused on the immediate issues of denuclearization. Hawks circled, wishing they could swoop down with direct military force, but lacked political muscle and—especially after the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—military resources to do so. Doves cooed, quietly waiting for history to do its handiwork, and sweep aside the government on the other side of the negotiating table.

The last two decades have shown that neither isolating North Korea nor half-heartedly negotiating with Pyongyang works. Instead, North Korea stands as one of the most striking failures of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy. The United States has been unable to stop North Korea’s nuclear program, end the Korean War, undermine or liberalize the Kim regime, integrate North Korea into the world economy, or reconcile North and South Korea. Any of these outcomes would have constituted some kind of progress—none has been achieved.

Instead, since the end of the Cold War, tens of millions of Koreans have died of famine, millions more suffered poverty and

despair. Over the past decade, the Pyongyang leadership developed enough weapons-grade plutonium for a half-dozen nuclear weapons, tested long-range missiles and a nuclear device, and participated in nuclear sharing activities, involving Pakistan and allegedly Syria. Kim Jong-il’s “military



first” regime, backed by armed forces of 1.2 million, maintains firm control over political power (even now, amidst reports of Kim’s ill health, the regime appears relatively stable). The United States, meanwhile, has 28,500 troops stationed in South Korea. The American military presence—at an estimated annual cost of \$5 billion—is a drain on resources in an era of rapidly escalating defense spending. America’s troops are also a major strain on the U.S.-South Korean alliance, which has frayed in recent years.

Bold Bilateral Initiative

The challenge facing the Obama administration is to transform a useful, short-term

mechanism to prevent war (the Six Party Talks) into a far-reaching process of creating peace on the Korean peninsula. This would require bracketing, to some extent, the nuclear issue and the human rights issues. The goal of diplomatic engagement with North Korea needs to be redefined



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as ending its isolation—from the dynamism of East Asian economic development, the socio-political progress of the southern half of the peninsula, and the basic tenets of international law and humane governance. Ending 60 years of antagonism with the United States and South Korea would help the North build economic, political, and military ties to the outside world, and lay the foundations for rudimentary political trust between North Korea and its neighbors. Defusing the nuclear threat would come in turn as the natural outgrowth of reconciliation. When Pyongyang ceases to feel threatened, the motive for a nuclear weapons program weakens.

When real economic benefit is to be reaped from normal economic contacts with the world, the financial temptation of selling nuclear technology, or leveraging the nuclear threat in exchange for aid, diminishes. Reports by the UN World Food Program indicate that regions of North Korea are facing famine conditions again, adding urgency to a moment in which Pyongyang might reciprocate a bold gesture on our part. In fact, beneath the surface of bellicose anti-American rhetoric, Pyongyang has consistently sent the message that it seeks normal relations with the United States. It might seem inconceivable that the regime could suddenly make peace with the Americans, after basing its legitimacy for so long on resisting American hegemony. But it seemed equally preposterous in 1971, with the Cultural Revolution still raging, that Mao Zedong might welcome Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon to Beijing.

Without waiting for the next mini-drama in the interminable succession of carrots and sticks over the Yongbyon nuclear plant, my suggestion would be for the Obama administration to dispatch a peace mission to Pyongyang. Vice President Joe Biden has a long record of working on the Korean issue, and might be a good candidate to act as the senior American emissary. Approaches might be made to Seoul and Pyongyang about the idea of Biden traveling along with a high-ranking South Korean envoy. Biden would initiate substantive peace talks, including the establishment of a U.S. Liaison Office in Pyongyang.

Biden could also pave the way for Pyongyang to do the same in Washington. The liaison offices would be initial steps in a broader initiative to peel away legal restric-

tions on travel and commerce between the two countries, with requisite care to restrict drug, counterfeit, and arms trade. The American emissary could explore how to bring North Korea under the Nunn-Lugar Act on decommissioning nuclear facilities, as well as create a sustainable energy and economic growth plan to foster expanded international trade, investment, financing, and development in the North.

Steady Multilateral Diplomacy

Achieving this breakthrough in North Korean relations would demand bold leadership and skilled diplomacy on the part of the United States. The first step is bilateral—signaling to Pyongyang that America wants to inaugurate a new way of doing business. But the bilateral move must be accomplished in tandem with nimble multilateral diplomacy, to ensure the key players—South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia—are fully vested with us in this endeavor. I'll leave it to the new administration's Russian advisors to think through the Moscow angle. But the contours of a peace initiative led by Korea's East Asian neighbors are not difficult to see.

Washington will have to work with two leaders—South Korea's Lee Myung-bak and Japan's Taro Aso—who are relatively weak domestically and tend toward a hard-line stance on North Korea. Fortunately, we should have a strong partner in Beijing with Hu Jintao. All three leaders will be taking cues from their constituencies. Bold engagement with North Korea is likely to galvanize support among dormant forces in South Korea. The response in Japan is harder to gauge. At a minimum, Washington must work with Tokyo to defuse the efforts of nationalist and right-wing elements, which are likely to use rapprochement with North Korea to advance their militarist agendas. China's political elite—so long as Beijing remains intimately involved in the

development of our strategy—is likely to be not only supportive, but a source of guidance. (The bottom line is that Beijing has the clearest picture of what is really going on in Pyongyang.)

Let's look at these three partners in order of difficulty, from easy to hard.

Beijing: A Steady Hand

We are likely to see Beijing playing a steady, supportive role in the Korean peace initiative. Again, history should be considered. The North Korean nuclear crises of the last two decades played out against the dramatic backdrop of China's rapid "peaceful rise" and the North's equally precipitous decline. China and North Korea pursued radically divergent socio-economic paths through the late twentieth century. North Korea reached its peak of economic and industrial development in the mid-1970s, at which point its per capita gross domestic product (GDP) was many times greater than China's. But just as Deng Xiaoping was leading China out of the fog of the Cultural Revolution to embrace market reforms and economic opening, North Korea plunged deeper into the socialist abyss. Even during the horrific famine of the late 1990s, Pyongyang hesitated to open its borders to aid. Those were the very years that China aggressively entered the world, negotiated World Trade Organization membership, bid to host the 2008 Olympics, privatized more of the state sector, and attracted foreign investors at unprecedented rates.

In spite of its economic success and yearning for stature, Beijing struggled to find a seat of honor at the table of great powers. It was hard to wash off the stain of the June 4, 1989, massacre in Tiananmen Square. And when China, from its perch on the UN Security Council, preached the doctrine of non-interference in domestic affairs, critics saw it as nothing more than the de-

fensive rationalization of one authoritarian state providing cover for others. But America's "global war on terror" tarnished the notion of principled intervention and foreign policy activism. The second nuclear crisis in North Korea erupted in 2003 at the confluence of these trends, presenting Beijing with a rare opportunity to demonstrate how its non-confrontational, non-interventionist approach to international relations could achieve better outcomes than America's wars fought in the name of *our* security and *their* freedom. Beijing made itself headquarters of the new Six Party Talks, and China emerged as the lead country in North Korean negotiations.

Beijing is willing to take the initiative on North Korea in part because of long-standing ties to Pyongyang. For centuries, China fought alongside Koreans in their struggles against foreign aggressors—particularly the Japanese. Korean kings of the Choson Dynasty acknowledged the supremacy of Ming and Qing China in return for autonomy and aid, a relationship known as *sadae* (serving the great). The spirit of this special relationship was revived in the post-imperial era. The Chinese Communist Party and Korean Workers' Party forged fraternal bonds during the anti-Japanese resistance in the 1930s. Beijing's decision in 1950 to send hundreds of thousands of troops to support the North Koreans against the American-led UN forces consolidated their "elder brother-younger brother" relationship. Kim Il-sung, the long-serving North Korean autocrat, later championed the autarkic national philosophy of *juche* (self-reliance) and resisted becoming a satellite of either Beijing or Moscow—just as Mao Zedong recoiled against any dominance by the Soviets after Stalin. But Beijing-Pyongyang relations maintained a

reserve of closeness likened by Mao to that of "lips and teeth."

The legacy of *sadae* emboldened Beijing to try to bring the North Koreans to the negotiating table. But in the face of threatening statements out of Washington, Pyongyang would often fall back on its default posture of *juche*—most dramatically when North Korea withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons

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in 2003 and tested a nuclear device in 2006, both done without Beijing's support. Despite these assertions of autonomy, Beijing avoided a falling out with Pyongyang. Chinese diplomats made earnest and creative efforts to get the Americans and North Koreans talking. And to his credit, George W. Bush welcomed Chinese involvement and publicly acknowledged Beijing's constructive role in the Six Party Talks.

President Obama's immediate task is to keep that positive momentum going, and enlist Beijing's leadership in transforming the Six Party Talks into the Korean Peace Process. From the perspective of improving Sino-U.S. relations, North Korea is one of the most promising areas of diplomatic cooperation between our two countries. Beijing looks increasingly inclined to take a leadership role on the global stage. Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao would be candidates for the Nobel Peace Prize if they helped broker a lasting accord. A comprehensive peace and reconciliation process on the Korean peninsula, with economic development playing a driving role, is also very much in China's interest.

The North Korean border is a funnel for destabilizing elements, with Koreans fleeing poverty and misery to travel the underground railroad across China to asylum in third countries, to stay and live illegally in China, or to be preyed upon by the vicious human trafficking rings operating along the border. Economic revival in North Korea could reduce this flow of refugees; it could also stimulate recovery in China's northeastern provinces, which have struggled economically since the reforms of the 1990s.

Historically, a strong, prosperous, stable Korean peninsula is good for China; whereas instability and civil strife on the peninsula are often the prelude to serious trouble for the continent. A vocal minority of Chinese Machiavellis, whether online or in Communist Party headquarters in Zhongnanhai, might resist changes to the status quo, and argue that a divided, on-again, off-again nuclear Pyongyang means leverage for Beijing. But steadier hands and clearer heads are likely to see how regional interests and national interests coincide, and provide crucial support in this endeavor.

Seoul: Political Divides

The conservative government in Seoul leans toward a "tough" line on the North, and Pyongyang has reciprocated with relentless invective against President Lee Myung-bak since his inauguration in February. This poses an obvious and immediate problem for the United States, as it is crucial to align our peace initiative with the democratically elected government in Seoul. After all, the overarching purpose of engaging North Korea is to bring peace to the peninsula and catalyze the process of reconciliation and reintegration between North and South. The Republic of Korea is not only a stalwart military ally; it is the real protagonist, along with the North, in the drama of Korea's division. In fact, much of the toughness in

Seoul grows out of frustration that South Korea is so often sidelined in the negotiating process. Thus we are faced with a real dilemma: how to pursue an ambitious engagement agenda and be willing to deal directly with Pyongyang, without violating our solidarity with Seoul—inadvertently generating more hard-line views by making South Koreans feel, yet again, cut out from the process, ignored by the Americans, and disrespected by the North.

Some rough patches are almost inevitable in trying to balance outreach to Pyongyang with fidelity to Seoul. Fortunately, a key political factor is running in favor of a peace initiative. "Conservative," in the Korean political context, is comprised of two main positions—taking a hard-line on the North and being strongly pro-American. If forced to choose, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak is likely to pursue close relations with the White House over confrontation with Pyongyang. President Obama's administration should do everything in its power to make this choice as painless as possible—that is to say, while pursuing a bilateral initiative to end the antagonism with North Korea, Washington should consult with and involve South Korea as much as possible. In brokering a peace, we should look for opportunities to nurture the economic synergy between the North, which is rich in mineral resources and cheap labor, with South Korea's strengths in agriculture, exports, and services. Mutual economic benefit would be the cornerstone in helping Koreans to rebuild a shared sense of the future. The new White House should make it clear to the South that its goal in resolving the conflict is to get out of the way, so that Pyongyang and Seoul can make greater progress in their own process of reconciliation, without the confounding triangulation of all problems via Washington.

An even more important underlying force at work that should generate support in South Korea for a U.S.-led peace initiative is the will of the people. Conventional wisdom has it that South Koreans are ambivalent about reunification. Seoul's wired, hypermodern youth, in stark contrast to student activists of even a decade ago, are seen as uninspired by the reunification ideal. Their middle-class parents, whose incomes still hadn't recovered from the 1997 Asian financial crisis before the current financial tsunami hit, worry over the huge costs of absorbing the North's decimated economy. And the political roadmap is harder to chart than it used to be. For decades, the dream of reunification was imagined as occurring after the Kim regime collapsed. Today, South Koreans entertain the possibility that they may have to somehow combine with the Kim regime in a hybrid political and military structure, rather than simply fill a vacuum in the North with Southern institutions and laws.

These are daunting economic and political challenges, so it should be no surprise that opinion polls reflect mixed sentiments about the future. But the will to reunify among South Koreans runs much deeper than pocketbook considerations, and should not be underestimated. Reunification is something close to a civic religion. The South Korean public is likely to support wholeheartedly a robust effort out of Washington to engage the North in the work of creating peace and prosperity for the whole peninsula—and would very possibly oppose its own government if Seoul were perceived to be dragging its feet or creating obstacles to rapprochement. The outpouring of anti-government, anti-American sentiment in the beef demonstrations this spring could

just as easily morph into an anti-government, pro-American movement to support real engagement.

Tokyo: A Reluctant Partner

Involving Japan in the endeavor to alter North Korean relations may prove trickiest of all. Prime Minister Taro Aso is a long-

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standing hawk on North Korea. Japanese public opinion also continues to harden, centering on two concerns—the abduction issue and the security threat.

North Korean agents kidnapped Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s. During Kim Jong-il's 2002 summit with Prime Minister Koizumi, Kim publicly acknowledged and apologized for a dozen kidnappings, and arranged for five abductees to visit their homeland (contrary to the terms of the “visit,” they remained in Japan). But the Japanese public disputes Pyongyang's assertion that eight abductees already passed away, and believes a much higher number were originally taken hostage.

North Korea's abduction of Japanese people decades ago was a brazen violation of international law, state sovereignty, and human freedom. The burden lies squarely on the government in Pyongyang to ensure a full accounting. It must be added, however, that many Koreans and Chinese, who empathize personally with families of the missing, might have mixed feelings in watching the Japanese government aggressively seek redress for past crimes of other Asian states, considering its own track record in historical accountability. And the

role of right-wing organizations in fanning the flames of anti-North Korean opinion in Japan suggests ulterior political motives at work.

In summer 2008, Tokyo and Pyongyang were making progress on a full investigation of the fate of the abductees, but the sudden retirement of Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda pulled the rug out from under these negotiations. Taro Aso seems inclined to follow hawkish instincts and try the hard-line approach to force the issue. This is unlikely to bear any fruit. The major breakthrough in the abduction issue occurred because Koizumi traveled personally to Pyongyang, and made it clear how urgent it was to resolve the issue, not only for its own sake, but as part of the process of normalizing relations with Japan. Kim Jong-il found this compelling and responded in kind. Since Koizumi left office in 2006, the backroom oligarchic nature of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party has reasserted itself and the prime ministership is once again weak. Shinzo Abe lasted one year in office, so did Fukuda. Who knows how long Aso will last?

As with Lee Myung-bak, Japan's leadership is unlikely to insist on a hard approach to North Korea if it jeopardizes the prized transpacific alliance. There are compelling reasons why Tokyo would want to play a constructive role in normalization. For one, Japan stands to benefit, like South Korea and China, from the economic opening of North Korea. Second, resolution of outstanding issues over the fate of the abductees is more likely to come as a consequence of genuine peace (rather than as a precondition for ambivalent engagement). Third, tying North Korea into an effective process of economic exchange and political trust would remove a major security threat from Japan's border, to the applause of Japan's pacifist majority.

Solutions and Antidotes

The solution to the myriad problems created by North Korea's long isolation is, quite simply, to end the isolation. The antidote to North Korea's evasive hostility, always linked to a demand for "face," is full engagement. The Obama administration, even in its honeymoon period, would come under fire domestically from critics on the right and left—from hawks on national security and hawks on human rights. But a middle course of robust, determined engagement, embracing the bilateral relationship while coordinating the multilateral diplomacy, has the potential to reverse 20 years of failed foreign policy. There are, of course, risks and uncertainties. North Korean domestic politics are still a bit of a black box: whether the question is Kim Jong-il's health, succession plans, or the strength of the "reform and opening" faction in Pyongyang. There is also the risk that we could get bogged down in back-and-forth over peace talks as we have become, to some extent, mired in the trench warfare of nuclear negotiations. And it could prove especially difficult to balance bilateral action with multilateral coordination, depending on domestic political developments in each of the involved parties.

Even calculated boldness inevitably entails risks, and they may be less than the dangers of surrendering to the superficial safety of the status quo. We would be wise not to repeat the mistake of Presidents Clinton and Bush—waiting for the next North Korean crisis to come to us, or waiting until the end of a second term before investing serious resources in finding a solution. Seizing the initiative is imperative. President Obama and Vice President Biden have the opportunity to do for North Korea what Kissinger and Nixon did for China, and to usher in a new chapter in the history of northeast Asia. ●