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Sticks and carrots won't get North Korea to give up its nukes. But a willingness to negotiate a peace treaty and provide security guarantees might.

[Mel Gurtov](#)



Issues: diplomacy, engagement, ngos, North Korea missile launch, nuclear tests, Northeast Asia Security Dialogue, nuclear weapons, Six-Party Talks, sunshine policy

In recent weeks, North Korea has sent the usual mix of signals about its strategic intentions on the Korean peninsula.

In July it carried out a ballistic missile test in the East Sea (Sea of Japan), in violation of UN resolutions. It also threatened retaliation—including a nuclear strike on the White House—over the annual U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) military exercises, which often involve as many as half a million soldiers. Pyongyang has called for an emergency UN Security Council meeting to deal with the threat it believes the August exercises, scheduled to begin August 18, pose—a threat that U.S. officials dismiss, as though the deployment of overwhelming U.S. and South Korean power could not conceivably be taken seriously by the North Koreans

But it's not all aggression. Perhaps in response to Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Seoul in early July, in defiance of presumed protocol that would have called for him to visit Pyongyang first, North Korea called on the South to join it in renewed efforts at national reunification. The ROK's response to this overture has been positive: It has announced a [North Korea aid package](#) to be channeled through two United Nations programs and South Korean civic groups—in all, over \$15 million.¹ Nevertheless, the road to peace is far from smooth: North Korea

Engaging North Korea should not be exclusively about denuclearization. It should be about enhancing security for all parties in the Korean peninsula, such that nuclear weapons become irrelevant. (Photo: Roman Harak / Flickr)

fired three rockets into the sea shortly before the August 13 arrival of Pope Francis in Seoul.²

U.S. relations with North Korea have been pushed into the background by events in the Middle East. But the so-called "North Korea nuclear issue"—"so-called" because the larger issue, which involves the interests of several countries, is security and strategic stability on the Korean peninsula—remains unresolved and potentially dangerous.

For a number of years, I and many other specialists on North Korea have urged the United States and other governments to genuinely engage that country. Through various confrontations over nuclear weapons and missile tests, name-calling, and on-again off-again talks in both multilateral and bilateral settings, we have persisted in 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 of easing the tensions that could again engulf the Korean peninsula in war. Negotiations such as at the Six-Party Talks, dismissed by critics as having accomplished little, in our view have established important baselines for normalized, peaceful relations among North Korea and other parties. Regular talks with the North are far more likely to yield security benefits than periodic rounds of military confrontation.

Making the case for engagement is especially challenging now, for several reasons. First is the draconian nature of the Kim dynasty's rule. Although many sources have described repression in North Korea, the execution of Jang Song-taek and others in December 2013, and the report in February 2014 of the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in North Korea, brought the brutality of the regime front and center. The report presents a searing indictment of the regime's widespread and systematic repression of its citizens: the expansive gulag, the numerous stories of torture and killings, the arbitrary arrests, the climate of fear.

In the current political climate in the United States, the North Korean leadership's crimes against its own people make the case for engagement especially unpalatable in the White House and in Congress. For the Obama administration to engage Iran is one thing—and even there it faces stern opposition at home—but North Korea lacks the constituency Iran has in the United States for promoting talks and arranging a new package deal. However, North Korea has nuclear weapons, making a compelling case for pushing ahead with talks.

Key U.S. allies would also have reservations about a robust engagement of the North. Japan under Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, [who is eager to carry out a constitutional revision](#) that would legitimize new military missions for the officially pacifist country, would object to rewarding a country that still may hold Japanese abductees and poses a missile threat to Japan. The Park Geun-hye administration in Seoul would probably insist on prior North Korean agreement to international inspection and verification of its nuclear enrichment and missile programs before endorsing engagement. Even so, [talks between Japan and North Korea](#) about the abductee issue have reportedly resumed as the DPRK has responded to Abe's partial lifting of sanctions;³ and, as mentioned, ROK aid to the DPRK has also resumed.

There are a number of powerful reasons for the United States to embrace engagement with North Korea. To the extent that engagement translates into regime survival, Pyongyang has long indicated interest in negotiating a concrete deal with the United States. The chances for this bilateral engagement would be greatest if the talks were embedded in a multilateral framework that builds on the Six-Party Talks of the past including China, Russia and South Korea.

What Engagement Should Mean

"Engaging" and "engagement" are much used, and much abused, terms. Most often, they are synonyms for *contact* or *involvement*, nothing more. So let me be clear on definitions, since when I propose that the United States 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 on all sides. The purpose of engagement, therefore, is to create an environment conducive to policy change by focusing on joint (as well as unilateral and multilateral) actions that will move the parties away from destructive conflict.

To be effective, however, 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.

In April, David Sanger reported in the *New York Times* that President Obama's North Korea specialists feel "stuck" on where to go next with North Korea. 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 beyond that, they seem also to accept the uselessness of talking altogether.

What the administration hasn't tried is a true engagement strategy. "Strategic patience" does not amount to an engagement strategy, any more than ordinary diplomatic contact at the UN or elsewhere. One finds frequent official reference to "engaging" North Korea—for example, by Deputy Secretary of State William Burns on April 8. However, what the Obama administration has offered during its six years in office is not engagement but sticks and carrots predicated on North Korean concessions: If North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons, the United States will then have dialogue with it. North Korean denuclearization is the ostensible U.S. price for deeper contact, which may or may not amount to serious engagement. Until North Korea yields on nuclear weapons, the United States will continue seeking to contain and undermine it through sanctions, military maneuvers, boycotts, 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* above all be about enhancing security for all parties with interests in the Korean peninsula, such that nuclear weapons become irrelevant and useless for strategic or political purposes in the context of negotiating a Korean War peace treaty six decades after the 1953 ceasefire.

To get to that conclusion requires serious thinking about 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, under what conditions 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?

Why Engagement?

The case for persisting in finding engagement opportunities with North Korea comes down to seven considerations.

First, North Korea 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 United States 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. U.S.-ROK military exercises and strengthened defense ties with South Korea and Japan may seem like standard procedures to us; but to the North Koreans, they are a reminder of their weakness and vulnerability. Former Secretary of Defense William Perry's understated reminder in 1999, after visiting the North as a special emissary of President Clinton, remains relevant: "We do not think of ourselves as a threat to North Korea, but I fully believe that they consider us a threat to them and, therefore, they see this missile [program] as a means of deterrence."

That is why U.S. security assurances to North Korea are so essential. When two prominent Americans visited Pyongyang in November 2002, they received a written personal message from Kim Jong-il to President George W. Bush that said: "If the United States recognizes our sovereignty and assures nonaggression, it is our view that we should be able to find a way to resolve the nuclear issue in compliance with the demands of a new century. ... If the United States makes a bold decision, we will respond accordingly." That position has been restated a number of times since.

Third, China's view of North Korea has changed. There are indications that it has come to regard the Kim regime as a strategic liability, though not to the extent of dumping it altogether, consistently carrying out UN-approved sanctions, or allowing Christian aid groups to function unhindered in the border area.⁴ Numerous Chinese commentaries of the last few years display impatience and irritation with North Korea, seeing its provocations of the South as a potential threat to China's own security. China's changed attitude presents an opportunity for creative multilateral diplomacy if, that is, we finally jettison the notion that China holds the key to forcing changes in Pyongyang's behavior. (Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai, for instance, complained about Washington's demands that his country do more to pressure Pyongyang into halting its atomic arms development or contend with U.S. repercussions for not doing so.) In fact, China can play a role, but the key remains the U.S. willingness to negotiate with North Korea.

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. Rather than South Korea continuing to rely exclusively on alliance with the United States, Kim proposed "to lead North Korea down a path toward peace, reform, and openness through reconciliation, interaction and co-operation with the South." Military deterrence and "non-tolerance of military threat or armed provocation by North Korea," Chung-in Moon explains in his definitive study of the Sunshine policy, were also part of Kim's approach. But Kim was determined to avoid giving the North any reason to believe that South Korea was out to absorb or threaten it.

Fifth, by abandoning engagement, the US strengthens the hand of those in North Korea's leadership who doubt the usefulness of negotiations, and forecloses opportunities for credible dialogue with leaders there who want to reduce tensions and gain concessions from the United States and others. As Kim Jong-il reportedly told Madeleine Albright in October 2000, if North Korea could get the same kinds of security assurances that Deng Xiaoping got from the United States in the 1970s, "he would be able to convince his military that the United States was no longer a threat and then be in a position to refocus his country's resources." There is no reason to think Kim Jong-un does not possess comparable authority and similar goals.

Sixth, engagement increases opportunities for direct contact with the North Korean people and lower-level officials. We have many concrete examples of how appreciative Korean people have been when they receive meaningful help, such as medical supplies and training, wind and solar power technology, and foreign-financed fisheries, apple orchards, and scientific and academic exchanges. Focusing on young people, as for example the Pyongyang Project does, is especially important. Someday, the work of NGOs may influence the transformation of North Korea's political system and may even, eventually, facilitate peaceful Korean unification. A new U.S. approach to North Korea based on an engagement strategy could play a vital role in facilitating such a process. It could provide a framework of support for the critical projects that NGOs carry out.

Seventh, we have to accept the fact that the Kim regime is not going to go away. Critics of engagement will argue that since the Jang execution, regime stability in North Korea is uncertain, and the usefulness of talking with Kim Jong-un may be doubted. Even gaining a hearing in Pyongyang is proving very difficult, as the State Department has discovered in trying to send an emissary there to free two U.S. citizens who have been jailed for espionage. But by every indication Kim Jong-un remains firmly in command, and the cyclical expectations in Washington that the regime will either self-destruct or wither away under outside pressure seem largely to be wishful thinking.

Consider the likely scenario if the United States and its allies reject engagement and continue the approach of insisting that North Korea must first eliminate its nuclear option before serious negotiations can get underway. 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. Moreover, influential figures in South Korea and Japan will argue that the time has come to have their own nuclear weapons. 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 regardless of whether they offer valuable assistance.

North Korea is just as tired of talk for talk’s sake as the United States is. 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 other words, fruitful negotiations can proceed only if Pyongyang sees engagement as strengthening regime and state survival.

North Korea would therefore most likely be interested in a U.S. (or U.S.-South Korean) proposal that would provide the following:

- It would offer some assurance against U.S. designs to bring about regime change.
- It would enhance North Korea’s legitimacy as an independent socialist state—meaning U.S. diplomatic recognition in particular—thus also preventing absorption by the South.
- It would provide international guarantees of North Korea’s security and ease and eventually end sanctions.
- It would at worst *warehouse* the North’s nuclear weapons—that is, allow their possession but verifiably take them offline—until the terms of a new agreement are largely fulfilled, thus helping satisfy the DPRK’s military.
- It would pave the way for long-term development assistance, increased trade and investment, and short-term food and fuel aid, thus also reducing dependence on China.
- And it would undermine arguments in South Korea and Japan for keeping open the nuclear-weapon option.

Embedding Engagement in Regional Security

Multilateral diplomacy, both among governments and Track II and III efforts, can help increase the likelihood of the long-term success of bilateral engagement. The first step would be the revival of six-party talks without preconditions and with recommitment 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 United States and other nations should present a package that, in return for verifiable steps to neutralize and perhaps gradually reduce 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 and Russia on board), and meaningful economic assistance from both NGOs and governments.

By replacing threats with high-level direct dialogue, negotiators can also 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 DPRK 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. On the other hand, if U.S. 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.

An alternative to a return to the Six-Party Talks would be the creation of a Northeast Asia Security Dialogue Mechanism (NEASDM). Such a group was anticipated in the final statements of the Six-Party Talks, and 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 NEASDM would not focus exclusively 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. It would develop a code of conduct to govern territorial and boundary disputes; military budget transparency, weapons transfers, and deployments. It would offer measures to combat terrorism and piracy and explore the creation of a nuclear-weapon free zone (NWFZ) in all or part of Northeast Asia. And it would develop ways to support confidence building and trust in the dialogue process itself.

Normalization of relations among all six countries should be a priority; full and mutual recognition between the DPRK, the United States, and Japan costs nothing but is an important incentive for meaningful North Korean participation.

All six countries in the Six-Party Talks should be members, but no others, although other countries or organizations (such as the European Union) might be invited to participate for specific purposes. 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), and could gain access to long-term economic development assistance, and the potential for security guarantees by the major powers that could be 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.

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, one that 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 United States 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.

This is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared in *Foreign Policy in Focus*.

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Notes

¹ ["S Korea Offers 13.3mn for UN Aid Projects in North"](#).

² Reuters, "[North Korea fires three short-range rockets as Pope visit North Korea](#)," August 14, 2014

³ J. Berkshire Miller, "[Abe's North Korean Advances](#)," August 10, 2014.

⁴ On this last point, see Philip Wen, "Christian Aid Faces Double Crackdown," *Sydney Morning Herald*, August 16-17, 2014.