

Try engagement for a change

By Leon V. Sigal

The debate: Sigal

Sustained conditional engagement is the only realistic way to bring about desired change in North Korea, especially nuclear and missile disarmament. It may not work, but the United States has yet to try – mainly because of the ideological intransigence of hard-line unilateralists.

FOR SIX YEARS, hard-liners in the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush huffed and puffed but failed to blow Kim Jung-il's house down. Instead, they provoked him to step up his development of nuclear weapons and missiles and impeded negotiations to halt them, preferring to watch North Korea arm rather than try what South Korea and Japan thought might get North Korea to stop: engagement and diplomatic give-and-take.

The allies had good reason to think so. Having verifiably frozen its reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon before President Bush took office, Pyongyang had just one or two bomb's worth of plutonium dating from 1991. Now it has eight to ten bombs' worth. Having stopped testing longer-range missiles in 1999, Pyongyang offered to end tests, deployment and production of all such missiles in 2000. Instead, the Bush administration halted talks with Pyongyang in 2001. Now the North has resumed testing longer-range Taepodong missiles. Where engagement had succeeded, attempts at isolation have failed.

Yet hard-liners believe Pyongyang is determined to arm and will never trade away its weapons. Their conviction is not just faith-based: it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Without a serious U.S. effort to negotiate, they are certain to be right.

Bush administration officials still talk about disarming North Korea as if it were pre-war Iraq or Libya. But North Korea is no Iraq. It really is making nuclear weapons. It has an active program to extract plutonium for bombs from spent nuclear fuel removed from its reactor at Yongbyon and a potential program to enrich uranium that is still years away from being fully operational.

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give them up for nothing. It wants the U.S., in return, to normalize political and economic relations and thus provide assurances that it won't attack, interfere in its internal affairs, or impede its economic development through sanctions or by discouraging aid and investment from others. If not, Pyongyang will keep making nuclear weapons and missiles.

Its negotiating stance is designed to drive home the point that if Washington remains its foe, it feels threatened and will acquire more deterrents to counter that threat. But, if Washington moves to end the current enmity, the regime says it will respond positively.

North Korea is no Libya, either. It will not preemptively disarm out of fear of being attacked. (Nor did Libya, which first offered to negotiate an end to its weapons programs in 1999 and did not give them up until it got what it wanted.) The war on Iraq, far from chastening Pyongyang, provoked it to accelerate its arms program. In January 2003, with U.S. forces tied down preparing for war, it challenged Washington by lighting three nuclear fuses. It refueled and restarted its reactor at Yongbyon, which had been verifiably frozen under the Agreed Framework of October 1994. It resumed reprocessing to extract the five or six bombs' worth of plutonium from nuclear fuel rods that it had removed from its reactor in 1994. (Those fuel rods had been stored at Yongbyon under the watchful

eyes of international inspectors, as required by the October accord.) It stepped up acquisition of gas centrifuges to enrich uranium.

It has since resumed construction of two larger nuclear reactors it had suspended under the Agreed Framework. These reactors will give the North the capacity to produce 30 bombs' worth of plutonium a year when eventually completed.

Hard-liners still refuse to deal. They see diplomatic give-and-take as a reward for bad behavior but their stance rests on a fiction. They insist that Kim Jung-il duped U.S. President Bill Clinton by halting North Korea's plutonium program while starting a covert effort to enrich uranium for bombs. As President Bush put it on March 6, 2003, "My predecessor, in a good-faith effort, entered into a framework agreement. The United States honored its side of the agreement; North Korea didn't. While we felt the agreement was in force, North Korea was enriching uranium."

The trouble is that the U.S. reneged on the 1994 Agreed Framework first, by failing to reward North Korea's good behavior. Washington got what it most wanted up front – a freeze of Pyongyang's plutonium program, which by 2002 could have generated enough fuel for at least 50 bombs. Washington did not, however, live up to its end of the bargain. When the Republicans won control of the U.S. Congress just days after the October 1994 accord was signed, they denounced the deal as appeasement. Shy-

ing away from taking them on, President Clinton backpedaled on implementation. He did little to ease sanctions until 2000. Washington promised to provide two nuclear power plants “by a target date of 2003,” but did not even pour concrete for the foundations until August 2002. It did deliver heavy fuel oil as promised, but seldom on schedule. Above all, it did not live up to its pledge in Article II of the Agreed Framework to “move toward full normalization of political and economic relations” – in other words, to end enmity and relax sanctions.

In 1997, after Washington was slow to fulfill the terms, Pyongyang threatened to break the accord. Its acquisition of gas centrifuges to enrich uranium from Pakistan began shortly thereafter. This was a pilot program, not the operational capability U.S. intelligence says it moved to acquire in 2001 after the Bush administration rejected talks. Instead, the administration disclosed that North Korea was a target for a preemptive nuclear attack. When the Bush administration in November 2002 halted shipment of heavy fuel oil that had been promised under the Agreed Framework, North Korea, in turn, restarted its plutonium program.

Pyongyang’s tactics convinced many in Washington that it should be punished for brazenly breaking its commitments. It convinced others it was trying to extort economic aid without giving up anything in return. Pyongyang was doing neither. It was playing tit for tat – cooperating whenever Washington cooperated and retaliating whenever Washington reneged. It is still playing tit for tat.

Why has Pyongyang persisted in negotiations in the face of hostility from Washington? In October 2001, Kim Jung-il decided to reform North Korea’s moribund economy, a policy he promulgated formally in July 2002. The economy

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has begun to revive, but reform cannot succeed without a political accommodation with the U.S., South Korea, and Japan that facilitates re-allocation of resources from military use, and a flow of aid and investment from outside.

South Korea, for one, concluded that engagement was bringing about needed change in North Korea. Acting on the belief that the North was on the verge of collapse, however, hard-liners in the Bush administration pushed for an economic embargo and a naval blockade to strangle it to death. All the North’s neighbors know that an embargo and blockade will provoke it to arm sooner rather than collapse, which is why they didn’t agree. Instead, they pursued talks of their own with North Korea, which convinced them that Pyongyang might be willing to deal.

By impeding a cooperative solution, unilateralists in Washington are on a collision course not just with Pyongyang, but more importantly with U.S. allies in Northeast Asia. American intransigence has been a catalyst for unprecedented regional cooperation to rein in the U.S. The 2003 Japan-Russia summit, as well as two Japan-DPRK summits, should be seen in this light. So too should South Korea's warming relations with China. Given the history of antagonism and the resurgence of nationalism in the region, such cooperation would have seemed unthinkable just a few short years ago.

A change of course by Pyongyang in September 2001 – four months before President Bush's "axis of evil" speech – helped open the way. Moving to reform its economy, and convinced it was getting nowhere with Washington, North Korea resumed ministerial-level talks with South Korea. In secret talks in Beijing at the same time, it began tiptoeing toward resumption of talks with Japan on normalizing relations. This marked an important shift for Pyongyang, which had engaged with Seoul and Tokyo throughout the 1990s only when it was convinced that Washington was cooperating as well. It had finally concluded that the path to reconciliation with Washington ran through Seoul and Tokyo. At the same time, it was reducing the risk of renewed confrontation with Washington.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's summit meetings with Kim Jung-il followed from that shift. After the Bush administration spurned talks with Pyongyang, Tokyo got tired of waiting for Washington. Less than three weeks after the "axis of evil" speech, President Bush had a summit meeting with Koizumi on February 18, 2002. At a press conference afterward, Koizumi, with Bush at his side, surprised him by declaring that Japan "would like to work on normalization of

relations with North Korea." That led to the September 17, 2002 summit meeting.

For Japan to act on its own was unprecedented. Throughout the Cold War, it had always deferred to the U.S. on security-related issues.

Hard-liners in Washington tried to impede rapprochement between Japan and the DPRK, but others close to the American president knew Tokyo was trying to get Washington to negotiate. They knew that failure to talk could put the U.S. military presence in play in Japanese politics by alienating supporters of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. This would strengthen the hand of right-wingers who insist "Japan can say no" to the U.S., and who want Tokyo to look after its own security unbound by the U.S. alliance. That concern prompted the U.S. administration to hold its first substantive high-level talks with North Korea in October 2002, but it was in no mood to negotiate. Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly confronted the North over uranium enrichment. When the North, in effect, put the program on the negotiating table, he made it clear Washington wanted no more talks: Pyongyang had to stop, or else.

If the administration's aim was to derail allied engagement with Pyongyang, it failed. Seoul and Tokyo, already aware of the uranium program, were not driven off course. After Kelly briefed the allies, Seoul went ahead with ministerial talks and Tokyo moved up the date for resumption of normalization talks. "I have decided to resume negotiations," Prime Minister Koizumi declared on October 18, "because I judged that taking the first major step of moving from an adversarial relationship to a cooperative one would be in the best interests of Japan."

That led to a second summit meeting with North Korea in May 2004. Koizumi was clear about his reason for going to Pyongyang: "We

need to make a breakthrough in stalled talks,” he said on his departure. At the meeting, Kim Jung-il underscored that his aim in improving relations with Japan was to coax the U.S. into ending enmity by noting, “progress in improving the bilateral relationship would largely depend on what attitude and stand the ally of Japan would take.” This applied to the issue of Japanese victims of North Korean kidnappings, and Tokyo’s other concerns.

If the administration’s high-handedness had driven Tokyo to seize the diplomatic initiative, it had even more pernicious effects in Seoul. Bush’s policies convinced many South Koreans that he was deliberately impeding North-South reconciliation – and worse, that the U.S., not North Korea, was the main threat to peace on the peninsula. Over the opposition of his own supporters, South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun tried to show that he was a loyal ally by sending troops to Iraq. He expected Bush to reciprocate, but Washington’s unwillingness to negotiate with Pyongyang further alienated Seoul, fanning the flames of anti-Americanism. On March 22, 2004, after U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pressed Seoul for a deadline for sanctions if North Korea did not resume talks, President Roh told military academy graduates that South Korea would play a “balancing role” in the region, breaking with what a presidential aide called “Cold War camp diplomacy” and acting independently of Washington and Tokyo. Two weeks later, South Korea’s defense minister said it would “raise the level of military cooperation between Korea and China to at least that shared between Korea and Japan.”

The U.S. administration’s uncompromising stance, in short, threatened to unravel U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia and also enhanced China’s stature in the region. Many in Seoul and

What they said

Washington

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Tokyo began to wonder whether they could rely on Washington for their security.

In the 1990s, Beijing had watched warily from the sidelines as Pyongyang wooed Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. China feared Pyongyang was moving to legitimize the U.S. military presence in Korea, or worse, become a U.S. ally. Washington, meanwhile, looked to Beijing for help with Pyongyang.

Beijing’s willingness to pressure Pyongyang became a litmus test for hard-liners spoiling for confrontation with China. For others in the Clinton and Bush administrations, the need for Beijing’s help with Pyongyang became the main justification for accommodation with China. Either way, the U.S. put China back into the game with North Korea, in a leading position to enhance its influence in the region by playing well

North Korea

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with others – not to pressure Pyongyang, but to get Washington to deal.

Awareness of its eroding position in Northeast Asia eventually prompted the Bush administration to enter into Six-Party Talks with North Korea, but it still refused to negotiate. Instead, it maintained that the talks were isolating the North and that pressure by China and others would bring it to heel. Finally, in September 2005, under pressure from Japan and South Korea, the U.S. grudgingly accepted a joint statement drafted by China that embraced the main goal it sought, a strategic decision by Pyongyang to abandon “all nuclear weapons and existing weapons programs.”

Does North Korea mean what it says? Nobody knows, with the possible exception of Kim Jong-il. But the surest way to find out is sustained diplomacy aimed at implementing the accord.

That requires Washington to take phased reciprocal steps to reconcile – in other words, end enmity – as Pyongyang eliminates its nuclear programs, as agreed in the joint statement.

That is what the Bush administration refused to do. When China first circulated a draft of what would become the September joint statement before the February 2004 round of Six-Party Talks, it was rejected with characteristic bellicosity by U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney. “We don’t negotiate with evil,” he told a meeting of top officials. “We defeat it.” Since September 2005, Washington’s irreconcilables have been at it again. The ink on the joint statement was hardly dry when Cheney and his hard-line cabal struck back, reneging on U.S. commitments and hamstringing U.S. negotiators.

Washington had agreed to “respect” Pyongyang’s right to nuclear power and “to discuss at an appropriate time the provision of light-water reactors” it had promised in 1994, but never delivered. Yet, in closing remarks just after accepting the joint statement, the chief U.S. negotiator, Christopher Hill, announced a decision, dictated by the hardliners, to “terminate KEDO,” the international consortium set up to construct the reactors. Later that day, Secretary of State Rice implied that the “appropriate time” for the discussion of providing reactors was when hell freezes over: “When the North Koreans have dismantled their nuclear weapons and other nuclear programs verifiably and are indeed nuclear-free ... I suppose we can discuss anything.”

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try spokesman said. “The U.S. should not even dream of the issue of the DPRK’s dismantlement of its nuclear deterrent before providing reactors, a physical guarantee for confidence-building.” Alternatives to the reactors as a “physical groundwork for building bilateral confidence” or a “physical guarantee for confidence-building” are conceivable. But, whether Pyongyang will insist on Washington’s commitment to provide reactors before it begins to eliminate its nuclear program remains to be seen. It is unlikely to do so without U.S. participation in South Korea’s offer to provide an equivalent amount of electricity.

Even worse, having declared in the September agreement that it “has no intention to attack or invade the DPRK with nuclear or conventional weapons” and having pledged to “respect [DPRK] sovereignty,” renouncing regime change, the administration backed away from these agreements, as well. Again under pressure from hard-liners, Hill undercut these commitments in testimony before the U.S. Congress days later by sounding the old refrain, “all options remain on the table.”

Worst of all, the administration began to impose sanctions under the Illicit Activities Initiative. The U.S. is right to try to prevent counterfeiting of U.S. currency and other illicit activities by North Korea by blocking its ill-gotten gains. But the measures go well beyond that. They freeze many of the North’s legitimate hard currency accounts and impede its foreign trade, a strange way to encourage economic reform.

In response, Pyongyang has publicly demanded the unfreezing of its accounts. More significantly, on March 7, it offered two alternatives that Washington soon rejected. One was to open accounts in a U.S. bank, the North’s way of underscoring that much of its hard currency was derived from legitimate trade.

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A second alternative was to establish a non-permanent U.S.-DPRK consultative body to resolve money-laundering and counterfeiting problems. North Korea’s emphasis on direct talks is understandable. Will the United States ever respect its sovereignty if it does not even deign to meet one-on-one?

Irreconcilables in the administration see sanctions as the way to block diplomatic give-and-take while they wait for North Korea to collapse. Instead of moving to free up North Korean bank accounts not involved in illicit trade, they are pushing banks to close other North Korean accounts needed for legitimate trade.

The U.S. administration, says a senior official, decided “to move toward more confrontational measures.” Why? According to Under Secretary of State Robert Joseph, “We believe that they will reinforce the prospect for success of those talks.” What does he mean by success? The an-

swer, according to another senior U.S. State Department official, is to turn Six-Party Talks into nothing more than “a surrender mechanism.”

When Hill wanted to go to Pyongyang to jump-start talks on implementing the joint statement, he was kept by hard-liners from going unless the North shut down its Yongbyon reactor, assuring that no talks took place. Hill was also kept away from talks with North Korean Vice-Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan in Tokyo on April 11-12. “Now we know what the U.S. position is,” Kim said afterward. “There is nothing wrong with delaying the resumption of Six-Party Talks. In the meantime, we can make more deterrents.”

While threatening more reprocessing and missile tests, Pyongyang reached out to Tokyo. The day of Kim’s comments, Song Il-ho, the DPRK’s negotiator in talks with Japan, criticized Tokyo for trying to involve Seoul in the abduction dispute, but added, “if we are to hold talks in a frank manner about ways to deepen the understanding of the two peoples, we are ready to do so at any time.” The next day, Kim Young-nam, the titular number two in Pyongyang, gave an interview to Kyodo news service extending an olive branch. “If the Japanese authorities will move toward the implementation of the Pyongyang declaration, there will be no problems that are impossible to solve” – a veiled reference to the abduction issue. This was an advance from the position enunciated by Kim Jung-il to Koizumi in their second summit meeting. Instead of entering into sustained negotiations, however, the Japanese government introduced a bill in the Diet to implement sanctions. Shortly thereafter, the North began preparations for the Taepodong test that it carried out in July 2006.

U.S. reluctance to engage on the nuclear issue seems puzzling. It is a proven way to induce in-

secure countries to forswear arming themselves with nuclear weapons and missiles. Trying to isolate them or force them to forgo arming tends to backfire. They crave reassurance, and usually respond better to inducements than to threats. Indeed, American engagement has a long record of accomplishment in stopping proliferation. In recent years, it has helped convince South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Libya to abandon the pursuit of nuclear arms. It may even yet work with Iran. Only with Iraq and Pakistan did it fail.

Of course, engagement strategies are not always appropriate for achieving American aims abroad. At times, engagement needs to be combined with coercion, or at least the threat of coercion. Yet a compelling case can be made for trying engagement with North Korea. It works. As the eight-year freeze on plutonium production and the nine-year moratorium on longer-range missile tests show, it has succeeded where isolation has failed. It is a particularly appropriate approach for the strong in dealing with the weak. It is time for President Bush to make a strategic decision to free Christopher Hill to negotiate with North Korea and arm him with real leverage that comes from conditional engagement, not airy threats of isolation.

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