Is it Still Possible to Engage North Korea After the Assassination of Kim Jong Nam?

By Leon V. Sigal

The assassination of Kim Jong Un’s half-brother reveals little about the North Korean regime that was not already known. It would be a tragic mistake if it impeded US President Donald Trump from finding out whether talks with North Korea to halt its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs are possible.

By Bruce Klingner

Everything being proposed today as the basis for future negotiations with North Korea has already been offered, tried and failed. It is a fool’s errand to resume Six-Party Talks as long as North Korea rejects the basic objectives of those negotiations, which is abandonment of its nuclear weapons and programs.
US PRESIDENT Donald Trump was tip-toeing toward talks with North Korea until the brazen assassination on February 13 in Kuala Lumpur of Kim Jong Un’s half-brother, Kim Jong Nam. That turn of events relieved the beleaguered government of South Korean President Park Geun-hye, which assumed the assassins had killed the talks along with Kim. But Park was impeached in December and removed from office on March 10, and Trump may yet hold negotiations to probe Pyongyang’s willingness to halt its nuclear and missile programs, as that is the most realistic way to keep allied security from deteriorating further.

Under Park, Seoul had sought to focus on the evil and fragile nature of the Kim dynasty and compel regime change. In a crescendo of disinformation, it mischaracterized the spate of defections and purges of high officials as evidence of impending collapse. It trotted out a recent defector from North Korea’s London embassy to echo its dubious claims. It inflated Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile advances, implying it was too late to suspend the programs. The source of Park’s angst was Trump’s expressed interest in talks with Pyongyang.

Seoul had paid lip service to the Obama administration’s “strategic patience” stance: pressure without negotiations and insistence that North Korea commit to denuclearization first. Pyongyang was open to talks, but not on US terms. Trump campaigned on a clean break from Obama. TRUMP THE DEAL-MAKER

Candidate Trump disparaged Kim Jong Un as a “total nut job” and a “madman playing around with nukes.” Yet he also expressed willingness to sit down and talk with him. “Who the hell cares? I’ll speak to anybody,” Trump said. “There’s a 10 percent or 20 percent chance I could talk him out of having his damn nukes, because who the hell wants him to have nukes?”

At times he showed an inclination to outsource the Kim problem to China. “I would get China to make that guy disappear, in one form or another, very quickly,” Trump told CBS on February 10, 2016. “China has absolute control of North Korea. They won’t say it, but they do, and they should make that problem disappear.”

The practitioner of “The Art of the Deal” first broached talking to Kim on Jan. 6, 2016, the very day North Korea conducted its fourth test of a nuclear device. “You have this madman over there who probably would use it, and nobody talks to him other than, of course, Dennis Rodman,” he told “Fox and Friends.” “But nobody is talking to him whatsoever, and nobody is discussing it with China.” In a May 17 interview with Reuters, he revealed his willingness to sit down with Kim in person, saying, “I would have no problem speaking to him.” In a campaign appearance in California on June 6, he disparaged experts’ “qualms about bargaining with North Korea.”

Once in office, rhetoric became policy. His “America First Foreign Policy,” published on Inauguration Day, declares: “[T]he pursuit of a foreign policy based on American interests, we will embrace diplomacy. The world must know that we do not go abroad in search of enemies, that we are always happy when old enemies become friends, and when old friends become allies.”

Trump’s deeds backed up his words. In a sub-
tle signal, on January 19, his last full day in office, Obama had authorized a token amount of US aid for North Korea — the first in five years — for flood relief, and the incoming Trump administration made that gesture public on Voice of America on January 25. Distracted by a torrent of tweets and leaks, the news media paid no attention, but Trump’s interest in talks did not pass unnoticed in Pyongyang. North Korean news agency KCNA acknowledged the aid on Feb. 10. And Kim Jong Un reacted cautiously to Trump. Whenever Washington and Seoul to wage preventive war to end North Korea’s arms program. As if to underscore that loose talk, on February 8, the US test-launched a Minuteman III ICBM from Vandenberg Air Force Base and starting on February 14, two days after the KN-11 launch, it test-launched three Trident long-range missiles from a submarine off the California coast. A 2+2 meeting with South Korean officials on December 20 last year pointedly drew attention to similar test-launches that had taken place in 2016: “The United States reiterated its iron-clad and unwavering commitment to draw on the full range of its military capabilities, including the nuclear umbrella, conventional strike, and missile defense, to provide extended deterrence for the RoK, and reaffirmed the long-standing US policy that any attack on the United States or its allies will be defeated, and any use of nuclear weapons will be met with an effective and overwhelming response.”

Sanctions have been tried for years with no discernible effect, but proponents say they take time to compel North Korea to the negotiating table on US terms. How long? Two years? Five years? Ten years? Never? In the meantime, how many nuclear and missile tests will North Korea carry out? How much fissile material will it make? How many ICBMs will it field?
REALITY OR ‘HEAD FAKE’?

Even after the KN-11 launch and the nerve-agent murder of Kim Jong Nam, the US State Department for the first time in five years issued visas for a North Korean delegation led by Choe Son Hui to attend a Track II meeting in New York. That decision was abruptly reversed shortly thereafter. Were the cancelled visas just another “head fake,” the White House’s buzzword for Trump’s tactic of misdirection? If so, to stave off trouble, the administration needs to reassure Pyongyang that it still wants talks.

The turnabout wrong-footed both Japan and China. Trump’s low-key response to the KN-11 launch had left Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe with the impression that he might hold talks with Pyongyang, something Abe was already doing. After the launch, China had announced the suspension of coal imports from North Korea for a year, leading proponents of tighter sanctions to crow that China was finally on side. Yet Beijing, anticipating that talks could be in the offing, may have been positioning itself to claim credit for coaxing Pyongyang to the negotiating table. It had already imported its quota of North Korean coal allowed under UN sanctions and could continue to let coal trickle in through leaky borders, then resume imports if the talks made headway.

Instead, the public debate in Seoul and Washington is about new sanctions, even resisting North Korea as a state sponsor of terrorism. North Korea has warned that “as a nuclear power” it will then “take stronger measures for self-defense” — presumably missile or nuclear tests.

NO TIME FOR SANCTIONS

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Strategic impatience seems warranted by now. North Korea’s fifth nuclear test may have yielded a nuclear device that can be mounted on a missile, although it may need a few more tests to prove the device’s reliability. The SMW nuclear reactor at Yongbyon has resumed generating more spent fuel, a refurbished reprocessing facility has just turned some of that spent fuel into plutonium, a new reactor is nearing completion, and its uranium enrichment program has expanded. At its current pace, Pyongyang could have enough fissile material for more than 50 nuclear weapons by the end of Trump’s first term.

Pyongyang’s launch on Sept. 5, 2016, of three intermediate-range Nodong missiles and the March 6 launch of four extended-range SCUDs showed how a barrage attack could overwhelm America’s Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system now being deployed in South Korea. It is also test-launching new missiles, an intermediate-range Musudan and a solid-fueled KN-11 ballistic missile — based on the older Soviet R-27 or SS-N-6 — that can be submarine- or mobile-launched to circumvent THAAD. An as yet untested KN-08 ballistic missile is assessed to be capable of reaching the US, but without testing, neither Washington nor Pyongyang can be sure of its range or reliability. Developing it could take three years or more. Cyberwarfare could at best delay the inevitable — if that.

Long before then, Trump will hear the siren song of preventive war. Heeding it would spark a crisis in the alliance.

A SENSIBLE APPROACH

The only way out of this predicament is to resume talks with North Korea to probe whether it is willing to suspend its nuclear and missile programs. That objective has been the focus of all three agreements that the US has made with North Korea: the 1994 Agreed Framework, the Six-Party joint statement of Sept. 19, 2005; and the 2012 Leap Day deal. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the first two accords did enjoy some success. The 1994 accord halted all fissile material production in North Korea for more than nine years, until the administration of US President George W. Bush scrapped it on the basis of US intelligence reports that Pyongyang was secretly acquiring the means to enrich uranium — with-