US Ambassador Stephen Bosworth’s recent visit to North Korea may herald a new, less confrontational approach by the administration of President Barack Obama to the regime in Pyongyang. If that is the case, then the US may well be learning the lessons of past failures in dealing with the North, argues historian Edward J. Baker.
Unfortunately, the hostility and obstructionism of conservative South Korean President Lee Myung-bak’s administration in Seoul and the apparent reluctance of the Obama administration to engage more promptly in serious negotiations side-tracked the process. The progress made by the administration of US President Bill Clinton after 1994, which was first squandered by the administration of President George W. Bush and then partly regained in its dying days in office, is again on hold. In addition, the Japanese government’s obstinate insistence on pushing its domestic concerns over abduction issues into the Six-Party talks has also hindered movement.

The Obama administration’s failure to establish a wise Korea policy quickly makes it harder to get back to the Six-Party forum. But Bosworth’s December 2009 visit to Pyongyang highlights the fact that we are still at a point where deterioration, stalemate or progress are all possible. This is an opportunity for the Obama administration to determine the future course of relations with North Korea and the future peace and stability of Northeast Asia.

To start with, threats and sanctions have failed. It is important that North Korea has been deterred from starting another war, but despite continual threats on both sides of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), force and the threat of force has not brought peace to the peninsula or speeded up the eventual goal of reunification. Sixty-plus years of sanctions may have made North Koreans poorer and hungrier, but they have not caused the government to fall, eased repression or improved human rights.

THE BEGINNING OF PROGRESS

Until the late 1980s, there was no progress at all toward peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. Then Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush undertook a series of talks...
between the US and North Korea in Beijing. Tensions began to ease. When the first President Bush announced the withdrawal of US tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea there was further progress, but things did not proceed smoothly. The Clinton administration quickly suspected that North Korea was trying to develop nuclear weapons. In 1994, Washington was sufficiently alarmed about this that it considered bombing the Yongbyon nuclear facility. Fortunately, the administration realized there was no safe way to take such a measure. Tension continued to rise with North Korea threatening to withdraw from the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT).

At this juncture, former President Jimmy Carter injected himself into the process. He had received an invitation to visit Pyongyang, and he decided to meet with Kim Il-sung — “the only person in North Korea who could change the course of events.” After some debate with the administration, Carter went to Pyongyang on June 15, 1994. He met with Kim twice, and on June 17 Carter informed Washington that Kim “had agreed to freeze his nuclear arms program under IAEA monitoring, and to resume high level talks on a comprehensive settlement of the nuclear issue.”

Although this agreement upset many in the foreign policy establishment, it started the process that led to the agreed framework — the October 1994 Geneva Accords. In the remaining years of the Clinton administration, North Korea did not test a nuclear weapon.

The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), which was created under the agreed framework and was to provide two light water reactors to Pyongyang for power generation in exchange for the dismantling of the nuclear program, ultimately failed, but it did show that the US, Japan and the two Koreas could work together. During the period, sufficient progress was made for Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to make a successful visit to Pyongyang and for Clinton to consider a state visit. In 2000, of course, Kim Dae-jung made his historic trip to Pyongyang where Kim Jong-il and he issued the June 15 declaration, which opened the way for unprecedented economic and humanitarian cooperation between the North and South. It is hard to imagine that Northeast Asia would have been more stable if North Korea had tested a nuclear device in 1996 instead of 2006. Moreover, the events from 1994 to 2000 could have been used constructively by the Bush administration in ways that might have avoided the North Korean nuclear tests of 2006 and 2009.

**GETTING IT WRONG**

Simply put, President George W. Bush, following the hard-line dictates of his conservative allies, got North Korea policy wrong. On March 6, 2001, Secretary of State Colin Powell said, “We do plan to engage with North Korea to pick up where President Clinton and his administration left off.” However, the following day Bush, with an embarrassed President Kim Dae-jung sitting beside him, repudiated Powell. All discussions with North Korea were frozen for an 18-month review. In his State of the Union address of January 29, 2002, Bush made his famous “axis of evil” characterization of Iran, Iraq and North Korea. Clinton’s hard-earned diplomatic gains with North Korea were replaced by the Bush Doctrine, which was summed up in a 2003 White House meeting by Vice President Dick Cheney with typical belligerence: “We don’t negotiate with evil; we defeat it.”

In October 2002, the US accused North Korea of trying to make highly enriched uranium, an alternative to plutonium as a basis for nuclear weapons. North Korea denied the accusation, withdrew from the NPT, expelled the IAEA inspectors, and then restarted the Yongbyon reactor, which had been closed down since the Geneva accords.

The US then withdrew from the accords. North Korea demanded bilateral negotiations, but the US insisted on Six-Party talks. In time, the North conceded and the talks eventually led to the September 19, 2005 deal in which North Korea agreed to dismantle its nuclear weapons. This is the position to which the Obama administration is now trying to persuade Pyongyang to return.
Perhaps the most stunning failure of the Bush approach was the September 2005 sanctions on Banco Delta Asia (BDA), the small Macau-based bank that was put under heavy US pressure after it was allegedly caught laundering money for Pyongyang. This came just as the Six-Party agreement was announced, which called for North Korea to abandon its nuclear program in exchange for political and economic concessions, mostly from the US.

North Korea refused to implement the agreement or hold more talks until its money in BDA was returned. It took two years to settle the matter and the North Koreans used the time to prepare for and conduct a semi-successful underground nuclear test on October 9, 2006. UN Security Council Resolution 1718 was passed in reaction to the test, but its sanctions seem to have accomplished nothing.

Would North Korea have staged the test had the US not abrogated the Geneva accords and imposed the BDA sanctions? We don’t know. However, it is clear that the reaction to the tough US policy disrupted negotiations. In the meantime, the North Korea nuclear test made a difficult situation much more difficult. If peace and stability in Northeast Asia was the goal, the hardline approach of the Bush administration was a failure.

A SMALL MACAU BANK

Once an agreement to return the BDA funds to North Korea was reached in the wake of the October nuclear test, things began to improve again. North Korea returned to the Six-Party talks, and the February 13, 2007 agreement, very similar to the September 19 agreement, was signed. Several months later, once the BDA funds were finally under North Korean control, the country rejoined the NPT, shut down Yongbyon, demolished its cooling tower, and turned thousands of pages of documentation on its nuclear program over to the US. Then, in August, President Bush removed North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism.

However, progress soon came to a halt. As the 2008 US presidential election campaign heated
up, North Korea slowed its compliance with the agreements, apparently waiting for the election outcome and, many supposed, hoping that Obama would win and mellow the negotiating climate.

After the election many were anxious for negotiations to start, but the new administration hesitated, and things went quickly downhill as North Korea grew more restive and bellicose. On April 13, 2009, the UN Security Council voted unanimously to condemn North Korea’s unsuccessful satellite launch of a week earlier; on April 14, North Korea declared that it would never return to the Six-Party talks and would resume its nuclear weapons program; again it expelled the IAEA inspectors.

Then on May 25, North Korea conducted its second underground nuclear test, quickly followed by several missile tests. The UN Security Council, including China — North Korea’s key ally — on June 12 unanimously passed more sanctions with Resolution 1874. North Korea called the new sanctions a “declaration of war” and said it would “weaponize” its plutonium and begin enriching uranium.

North Korea has lived with sanctions for 60 years, so why expect these latest to be more successful? Pursuing a North Korean ship around the Pacific for a couple of weeks, confiscating a pair of yachts being built for Kim Jong-il in Italy, impounding a North Korean airplane and arresting its crew in Thailand, and so on do not mean that sanctions have succeeded. In this matter, success would mean getting North Korea to comply with the agreements it has signed and dismantle its nuclear program. Sanctions and threats will not do that in the foreseeable future.

**THE FAILURE OF SANCTIONS**

A major reason that these sanctions have failed, like others before them, is China’s perception of its national interests. And despite China’s key role in the Six-Party talks, stated distress with North Korea over its nuclear tests and its vote for Security Council Resolution 1874, it remains North Korea’s largest trading partner and principal ally. They fought together in the Korean War. They have a long common border, and about

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2 million ethnic Koreans live in the Chinese provinces adjacent to North Korea. Many ethnic Koreans fought on the communist side during China’s civil war. Practically speaking, it is highly unlikely that China will cut off North Korea’s supply of food and fuel in view of the risk that such a move might precipitate the collapse of North Korea. That would send millions of hungry refugees into China and pose the real possibility that US and South Korean troops would soon be stationed on the border with China.

So how can the process be put back on track? For starters, the US should take the military option off the table. North Korea has long sought a firm US commitment not to attack it, in particular a pledge not to use nuclear weapons. This does not seem unreasonable. It would not be a promise to drop the defense of the South, and, even if North Korea attacked, the use of nuclear weapons with their potential impact on the entire peninsula and the surrounding area would argue strongly against their use.

Secondly, President Lee Myung-bak should affirm his support for the two agreements with North Korea negotiated by his predecessors. South Korea undermines its own credibility when it criticizes the North for failing to keep its agreements and then does not keep its own word. The agreements reached with Kim Jong-il in 2000 by Kim Dae-jung and in 2007 by Roh Moo-hyun both reduced tensions and are regarded by North Korea and many in the South as binding. Lee’s refusal to affirm them — presumably because his predecessors were liberals and he is a conservative — has caused much of the increase in tension that has marked his watch.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the Obama administration should propose peace treaty negotiations. In light of North Korea’s long-expressed desire for a peace treaty and normal relations with Washington, properly crafted, it would be an offer they could not refuse. This is not a far-fetched idea. Presidents Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong-il agreed in October 2007 that there should be such negotiations including at least North Korea, South Korea and the United States.

If the US-South Korean side takes these three steps, North Korea, which has very few other options and is even trying the patience of China, seems likely to reciprocate by agreeing to resume the Six-Party talks, declaring a moratorium on nuclear and missile tests and ceasing its reckless threats against the South. They may not do it, but the US and South Korea should put them to the test.

If these steps are not taken, I fear we can expect many more years of confrontation, high military expenditures, famine and human rights violations in the North and the continued threat of a nuclear-armed Pyongyang. A measured and conciliatory approach can bring peace and stability to Northeast Asia.

The process, however halting, seems to have begun with Ambassador Bosworth’s December visit to Pyongyang, and statements from both sides that a series of “common understandings” were reached on the need to resume the Six-Party talks and implement the September 19, 2005 Joint statement, which includes in it language calling for a peace regime to replace the existing armistice that ended the Korean War. President Obama’s reported letter to Kim Jong-il is also promising, while Kim Jong-il also sounded a conciliatory note in October when he told Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao: “Our efforts to attain the goal of denuclearizing the peninsula remain unchanged. The denuclearization of the peninsula was the behest of President Kim Il-sung.”

It is unclear what these words actually mean, how far Bosworth’s discussions went and what next steps will be taken. But at least Washington is talking again to Pyongyang. There is really no alternative.

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