Hubris Versus GRIT: Put Pride Aside and Help Korea Find Peace
By Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

Years of ignorant, pride-driven foreign policy have characterized relations in Northeast Asia, and this is amply evident in the continuing standoff over North Korea’s nuclear program, writes Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

The lessons learned from the way the United States and the Soviet Union slowly ratcheted down tensions during the Cold War could be modified and applied on the Korean Peninsula. But who will make the first move — the US or North Korea?

OF THE MANY FACTORS shaping conflict in Northeast Asia, none has been more pervasive and persistent than the hubris displayed by each player. Americans and Koreans — both in the South and the North — have often been blinded by hubris in dealing with each other. Their arrogance and disdain for each other has damaged all parties and caused opportunities for mutual gain to be aborted.

Always eager to exploit any symptom of weakness, the major players in Northeast Asia have failed to nourish the green shoots of hope planted by forward-looking individuals in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This hubris has made it more difficult for actors to adopt and implement a policy orientation like the one that once helped foster détente between the United States and its two Communist adversaries, the USSR and China. This strategy, known as GRIT, stands for “graduated reciprocity in tension-reduction.” This essay suggests how, if they wanted peace, Americans and Koreans — both in the United States and the north as victim. The US claimed national trusteeship for Korea, one that would go from 1911 until 1942.

Even as World War II unfolded, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not believe that Korea was ready for self-rule. He urged instead an international trusteeship for Korea, one that would go on for decades. His successor, Harry S. Truman, did not think Koreans should have a seat at the table.

The hubris on display in Washington at the April 1945 conference that finalized the United Nations Charter.

HUBRIS AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS
Hubris is overweening pride — often blended with insolence, wanton cruelty, condescension, contempt and even sadism. It is the opposite of prudence, self-control and temperance. Ancient Athenians treated hubris as a crime and contrasted it with sophrosyne — sound-mindedness, prudence and reasonableness.

An element of self-confidence is needed to achieve great things. But excessive pride can lead individuals and groups to actions that harm themselves and others. No one — no institution or country — has cause for overweening pride. Some humans may be better than others in some respects, but no one is perfect.

Hubris leads to misperceptions and reduces awareness of shared vulnerabilities. How could anyone think straight in the presence of Putative demi-gods such as Kim II Sung? Hubris also signifies not only excessive pride but a penchant for bullying. Hubris readily feeds into condescension, arrogance and wanton violence. Both kinds of hubris — pride and bullying — have inspired aggressive policies by outsiders toward Korea and between North and South Koreans.

For centuries, the Chinese demanded that Koreans pay tribute to the Middle Kingdom. Similar hubris led France and the US to deploy warships to “open” Korea to their merchants and missionaries. Hubris persuaded Japan and Russia in the late 19th century to see Korea as nothing more than a bridge to Manchuria, a conduit to which each felt entitled. After defeating an overconfident Russia in 1905, Japan made Korea a colony of the Japanese Empire. Infatuated with its own post-1898 empire, Washington agreed to Japanese domination of Korea in exchange for Japanese acceptance of US rule over the Philippines. In the wake of this secret understanding, no American president spoke of Korea in public from 1911 until 1942.

Even as World War II unfolded, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not believe that Korea was ready for self-rule. He urged instead an international trusteeship for Korea, one that would go on for decades. His successor, Harry S. Truman, did not think Koreans should have a seat at the April 1945 conference that finalized the United Nations Charter.

Continuing to treat Korea as a pawn, US and Soviet negotiators agreed in August 1945 to occupy a Korea divided at the 38th parallel. The Soviets had little use for the potential leaders of the North, but they brought in and installed Kim II Sung. The Americans disliked the contending factions in the South, but eventually backed Syngman Rhee, thus bringing to mind the oft-cited saying, “He may be a bastard, but he’s our bastard.”

Hubris has shaped policy in each capital concerned with Northeast Asia. In Seoul, Rhee dared to provoke or test North Korea, even though his armed forces were weak. In Pyongyang, Kim assumed that the South Koreans would welcome his invading armies. Joseph Stalin in Moscow and Mao Zedong in Beijing viewed the Korean chessboard only in terms of how war could advance their interests.

The hubris on display in Washington at the time fed on racism as well as ignorance of Asia. Though American leaders quickly realized that the US needed to retain a strong presence in Europe and Japan, few saw many reasons to build up South Korea economically or prepare it to cope with a rapidly militarizing North. When North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel in June 1950, fewer than 300 US troops remained in the South. Having decided to counter the North’s attack, however, President Truman then permitted Gen. Douglas MacArthur, one of the most hubristic generals in history, to conduct the war until the general’s overconfidence blinded him and provoked China’s intervention.

Each participant in the Korean War exuded self-righteousness. North Korea posed as liberator and the South as victim. The US claimed to represent the UN and the rule of law. Moscow insisted it was an innocent bystander even though Stalin had armed the North, approved its attack plan and authorized Soviet pilots to fly combat missions. Chinese “volunteers” entered the fray against US imperialism.
Korea receded from the front pages of world news after the 1953 Armistice, but leaders of the US, the USSR and China found themselves testing policies that academic analysts later referred to as tit-for-tat (TFT) and graduated reciprocity in tension reduction, or GRIT. Policies resembling TFT were known and had been practiced for millennia — an “eye for an eye” and “one good deed deserves another.” The standard version of TFT dictated that each side counter the other’s hard moves in kind, condemning the parties to endless rounds of mutual belligerence. The “nice” version of TFT suggested that if state A makes the first move, it should be conciliatory. From then on, each state should respond to nice moves with nice moves and to tough moves with tough ones. If the “game” continued for many rounds, both sides should learn that it pays to cooperate.2

This nice version of TFT could work in an academic laboratory, but real-world politics are messy. Often it is unclear which side started the conflict with a hard move. In tense relationships, each side feels compelled to match the hard words and deeds of the other. How to escape this treadmill? Psychologist Charles E. Osgood suggested this answer: One party to the conflict must take the first step by announcing a strategy intended to foster détente. It should proceed to initiate a limited series of unilateral concessions. If the other side reciprocates, each party’s conciliatory moves should become more weighty. These interactions should spawn a process of GRIT, leading to peace.3

However, an orientation toward GRIT confronts six major pitfalls:

- First, which side goes first? The stronger side can better afford to risk concessions, but it may ask, “Why forgo any advantage?”
- Second, small steps may lead nowhere. To be safe, the initiator usually begins with symbolic gestures. The other side may interpret these as cheap tricks and not reciprocate. Neither side wishes to be fooled.
- Third, the initiator may renounce GRIT before the other side absorbs the message and devalues an appropriate response. If each side’s assets are asymmetrical, it may be difficult to find a proportional concession. The initiator cannot wait long if domestic critics attack its “giveaways.”
- Fourth, foes of détente or extraneous events in other realms can throw a monkey wrench that disrupts the process of tension reduction.
- Fifth, bureaucratic inertia and vested interests can throttle GRIT. Purveyors of propaganda and “dirty tricks” may continue business as usual.
- Finally, momentum may be hard to sustain. The first steps toward conciliation may come cheap, while further moves encounter profound obstacles and greater risks.

GRIT AMONG THE GREAT POWERS AND ACROSS THE DMZ


US President Richard Nixon’s administration used GRIT-like tactics to open a direct dialogue with Beijing in 1971-1972. Worried about a possible rebuff from China, however, Nixon and his national security advisor Henry Kissinger kept their overtures to Beijing a secret. They departed from Osgood’s recommendation that top leaders announce in advance their effort to change the game. But Zhou Enlai understood Kissinger’s nuanced messages and responded in kind.

Efforts to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula have at times raised hopes, only to reach an ugly impasse. In 1970, a US Army lieutenant in the United Nations Command at Panmunjom...
If ostensible concessions are trivial, they may inspire more suspicion than confidence. But if they are far-reaching, the recipient may just pocket them and ask for more. These dangers can be minimized by an ostensible ‘concession’ that benefits both sides.

told me how he had tried to improve the atmosphere within the conference room there. Instead of standing stiffly and glaring when a North Korean indicated that he wanted to pass, the American smiled and made way for him. Shortly thereafter, the American found himself surrounded by several North Koreans who began to jostle him. “Knuckle practice” nearly ensued. The North Koreans, it turned out, interpreted the lieutenant’s conciliatory gesture as weak-ness. Obviously, true GRIT could not begin with gestures initiated by a mere lieutenant. For GRIT to work, the US president or head of the UN team would need to announce a new strategy — and make sure that North Korean leaders and troops got the message.

Meanwhile, improved relations between Washington and Beijing, along with signs of US-Soviet détente, pushed South and North Korean officials into a series of secret meetings in 1971-1973. But alas, after many protestations of solidarity, the Park Chung-hee regime in Seoul and that of Kim Il Sung in Pyongyang gave up all pretense of good will in 1973. They terminated their dialogue and stepped up clandestine efforts to develop nuclear weapons. The GRIT-like tactics of each side had not been sincere. Arrogant self-confidence ended up in a zero-sum struggle that neither side could win. North Korean leaders have often proclaimed their desire to do business at the highest level with the US. Kim Il Sung proved himself ready to deal when former US President Jimmy Carter traveled to Pyongyang in 1994; Secretary of State Madeleine Albright thought she achieved an understanding with Kim Jong Il in November 2000. On the other hand, the North-South summits in 2000 and 2007 appeared to magnify enmity: North Korean leaders treated South Korean Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun as patsies who could be milked for one-sided concessions. The South Korean “Sunshine Policy” could have been an exemplar of GRIT, it had been reciprocated. Cool to the president of an internet goliath, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un chose not to meet Google’s Eric Schmidt or former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson when they visited Pyongyang in January 2013.

PROSPECTS FOR TRUE GRIT
Without regime change in the North, some observers see no exit from and no solution to the US confrontation with Pyongyang. Ultra-hawks even call for a pre-emptive attack on North Korean missiles. Less rabid hawks say the US should not talk with North Korea until it asks for surrender terms. They urge Washington to tighten the screws until the North Korean regime buckles. Doves and owls worry that even Secretary of State John Kerry is too rigid because he offers to resume talks with the North but only if Pyongyang shows a willingness to denuclearize, that is, to give away the store before negotiations begin.

Negotiators should aim to enhance their side’s enlightened self-interest. This is the bottom line of the classic primer for negotiators, Getting to Yes by the late Roger Fisher and William Ury. Their conclusion seems nearly self-evident, but the US and North Korea usually flout this commonsense guideline; they both start with a “position” or a “principle” and proceed to get nowhere.

The US position is that North Korea must agree in advance to denuclearize before negotiations can resume and before Washington will discuss a peace treaty to replace the 1953 Armistice. Pyongyang’s position is that North Korea must be recognized and accepted as a nuclear-weapons state. The US principle is that North Korea must return to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The North Korean principle is that it must possess a nuclear deterrent and be treated the same as Israel, Pakistan and India, which have never signed the NPT and now have their own nuclear arsenals.

These positions and principles are incompatible. If Washington and Pyongyang do not budge, a deal between them will never be reached. If they want to change the game in Northeast Asia, both governments would have to declare its intention to foster a new relationship that creates value for each party. Of course, the new leader in Pyongyang since 2011 could also take the first step towards detente, but his opening moves have been in the opposite direction.

Second, the initiate must make its declaration appear serious and sincere. Credibility can gain from personal contacts at a high level. Rea-gan and Gorbachev cultivated mutual trust at the Reykjavik Summit in 1986 and subsequent meet-ings. But there are risks. The Kennedy-Khrushchev encounter in 1961, for example, probably led the Soviet leader to misjudge Kennedy. Con-ciliation must not be presented as weakness.

Appropriate actions can also build credibility. If ostensible concessions are trivial, they may inspire more suspicion than confidence. But if they are far-reaching, the recipient may just pocket them and ask for more. These dangers can be minimized by an ostensible “concession” that benefits both sides.
“Reciprocity” is harder to envisage and implement when one side is much weaker than the other. The US and the USSR could agree to reciprocate on concessions by virtue of their rough parity. The US could promise again never to attack North Korea, but such words do not assuage North Korean anxieties when Washington can readily mobilize aircraft carriers and other US forces to attack it. Washington and Seoul could limit their joint maneuvers, but such restraint is unlikely while Pyongyang threatens to incinerate Seoul and Washington. Hubristic about its technology, Washington responds to North Korean bombast by deploying anti-missile defenses never tested under realistic conditions, but which are sure to press Beijing and Moscow to buttress their forces.

A WAY FORWARD
What would it take to persuade Pyongyang to freeze, if not dismantle, its nuclear weapons programs? The agenda could include the familiar menu of energy, technology, food, lowering sanctions and granting diplomatic recognition. Pyongyang has also demanded acceptance as a “nuclear-weapons state,” but this would entail more than semantics. It would reward North Korea for scorning international norms and open the way for Iran to take the same route. However, a freeze or moratorium on nuclear weapons development might satisfy all parties. It could require the warehousing, if not the destruction, of existing stocks. Pyongyang could then claim to have an adequate nuclear deterrent, even though warehoused — and its stocks could not be improved and would deteriorate. A deal along these lines was signed by US and North Korean representatives on Feb. 29, 2012, but fell apart weeks later when the North tested a long-range rocket.

Each of the major actors in Northeast Asia is self-righteous. Feeling that its generosity has been abused and its interests ignored, each is reluctant to take the first step to break from the treadmill of tit-for-tat policies. The good news is that five of the six major actors in Korean affairs would prefer stability to tense uncertainty. For the Kim Jong Un regime, however, the overriding priority is survival. To this end, it engages in actions that foster instability and uncertainty. By far the weakest player, its options are the most circumscribed.

The strongest player is the US. The Obama administration could consult with South Korea, China, Japan and Russia to develop a grand bargain that would be good for each actor, including North Korea. Washington could afford to make concessions to develop GRIT-like momentum. For all this to happen, the Obama team would need to assign more priority to Northeast Asia and persuade Republicans that politics should stop at the water’s edge. In 2012-2013, however, US policy toward North Korea was overrun by a get-tough pivot toward China, even as Washington pleaded for Beijing to pressure Pyongyang to change its ways. The good news is that China, for its own reasons, got tougher with Pyongyang and heard from a North Korean general in May that North Korea was ready to return to negotiations.

To sum up, GRIT can be a useful tool of diplomacy, but only if each concerned actor wants greater harmony and agrees to give up small claims for a larger gain.

Walter Clemens is Professor Emeritus of Political Science, Boston University, and Associate, Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. He wrote Getting to Yes in Korea, with a foreword by Governor Bill Richardson (Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers and Seoul: Hanul, 2010).