Negotiating with Revolutionary Pariah States: Why North Korea Is Not Iran
By Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

WHICH HAS PRIORITY, security or arms control? This question paralyzed negotiators nearly a century ago when diplomats from the Soviet Union, devoted to revolution, faced the victors in World War I, anxious to preserve the new world order. Before the “Great War” and the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, Vladimir Lenin denounced disarmament as a counter-revolutionary dream of bourgeois idealists. By 1922, however, after Communists consolidated their hold in Soviet Russia, Lenin endorsed disarmament negotiations with the West as a way to foment revolution by other means. In response, France and Poland demanded “security first.” They refused to disarm until Soviet leaders forswore revolution. This standoff continued until Adolph Hitler’s Germany, a revolutionary pariah like the Soviet regime, threatened the security of Europe as well as the Soviet Union. Hitler in 1934 demanded the right to re-arm, thereby ending all talk of disarmament and forcing other Europeans and the Soviets to energize their own arms build-ups. By 1939, however, Germany was stronger than any of its neighbors.

Today, the US leads a coalition devoted to maintaining the status quo in nuclear arms. The main challengers have been North Korea and Iran, each a revolutionary pariah struggling within a cage of economic and other sanctions. Pyongyang is explicit: It wants nuclear arms for security and acceptance as another nuclear-weapons state. Each of its neighbors, as well as the US, fears that Pyongyang’s revolutionary aspirations, backed by nuclear weapons, will set off a chain reaction that would destabilize Asia and the world.

Iran lags North Korea in nuclear research and development. But Tehran’s behavior has implied that, when its nuclear programs are more advanced, Iran too could opt to join the nuclear-weapons club. Still, Tehran denies that it wants nuclear arms and claims to seek only the right to produce nuclear energy. In January 2014, Iran and six world powers completed a deal to freeze for at least six months much of Tehran’s nuclear program in exchange for limited relief from Western economic sanctions.1

MODEST AMBITIONS, ECONOMIC WOES
Compared with the worldwide ambitions of the former Soviet Union, the revolutionary programs of North Korea and Iran are modest. Pyongyang seems to preserve its regime and unify the Korean Peninsula. Tehran also concentrates on regime security, but has been active in supporting co-religionists in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain and Yemen. Some Iranian leaders continue to preach death to both Israel and the “Great Satan” in America. It seems clear, however, that if Iran ever acquired the means to attack Israel, not to mention the US, any preparations to do so would probably be halted by a pre-emptive strike.

Having executed his uncle Jong Song Thaek and some of his associates, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un seems in 2014 to exercise total control in Pyongyang.2 In sharp contrast, Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani is kept on a short leash by Supreme Leader Sayyid Ali Hosseini Khamenei.3 So, if we speak of “Iran” or “Iranian leaders,” we refer to a divided government in which relative moderates speak and act at the forbearance of hardline conservatives.4 There may be no more of a consensus in Tehran on the Interim Nuclear Deal than in Washington. Hardliners on each side feed mutual distrust.

The rulers of North Korea and Iran face a dilemma. They hesitate to open their doors to foreign influences, and yet each country’s well-being demands integration with the outside world, not isolation and hostility. Thanks in part to oil revenue, Iran’s annual per capita income exceeds US$13,000, while North Korea’s is less than US$2,000. Economic growth in each country is stunted. According to the CIA World Factbook, North Korea’s tiny economy grew at 1 percent in recent years, while Iran’s much larger economy contracted by nearly 2 percent. Each country depends heavily on trade — at least one-tenth of GDP and perhaps as much as one-third.5 But each country is hobbled by sanctions. How, for example, can Iran obtain spare parts for Boeing airliners it acquired before 1979? Life expectancy in Iran and North Korea is about 70, much lower than in some neighboring states. Public health in both countries suffers from sanctions as well as the inefficiencies of a government-controlled economy. Iran gives more space to the private sector than does North Korea, but the Heritage Foundation ranks both countries among the most “repressed” economies in the world.

Inflation in Iran hit 27 percent in 2012 and 42 percent in 2013. Nearly a quarter of Iranian youths have no jobs. To be sure, a privileged few Iranians have become rich, and the top 10 percent possesses nearly one-third of the country’s wealth. Some 20 percent of Iranians are obese, while at least 5 percent of children are underweight. Infant mortality in Iran is high — 40 per 1,000 live births. A quarter of adults are illiterate, more women than men. North Korea, by contrast, stipulates 12 years of education for all citizens.6 Sanctions curtail economic growth both in Iran and North Korea, though elites in each country can still smuggle in creature comforts. While leaders in Pyongyang seem to care little if their people go hungry, those in Iran do worry about popular unrest and labor to lift sanctions. Iran has a large

1 Under the interim deal, Iran agreed to stop enriching uranium beyond 5 percent, a level sufficient for energy production but not a bomb. The country’s stockpile of uranium enriched to 20 percent, a step toward weapons-grade fuel, would be diluted or converted to oxide so it could not be readily prepared for military purposes. Iran also agreed not to install any new centrifuges, not to start up any not already operating and not to build new enrichment facilities. But the agreement did not require Iran to stop enriching uranium to a low level of 3.5 percent or dismantle any existing centrifuges. The interim agreement provided a basis for a more comprehensive accord and added at least several weeks to the time Iran would need to acquire enough enriched uranium for a bomb. But the accord could be scuttled and reversed by either side.

2 The leader’s New Year address on Jan. 1, 2014 boasted that factionalism had been removed. See www.kcna.co.jp/index-e.htm (accessed 1/5/14).


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middle class that is well informed about the world and demands a better quality of life. (I cannot for- get the university-educated professionals who, in their well furnished flats, hosted me in 1998 and recalled, over the course of the evening, how they had been jailed and tortured by the theocrats’ security police in the 1980s.4)

A rarified elite exists in Pyongyang along with an emerging commercial sector in several cit- ies, but most North Koreans are both poor and repressed.4 A large percentage is malnourished. While about 4 percent of North Koreans are obese, more than 20 percent of children are under- weight. John Park, a researcher at the Massachu- setts Institute of Technology, finds that external pressures have stimulated entrepreneurs in China and North Korea to develop new ways to evade sanctions. Trade is booming across the Tumen River border, and a privileged few in North Korea still manage to obtain five-star cognac.

Freedom House judges North Korea the least free country in the world. While Iran has elec- tions, it too ranks among the “not free.” North Koreans have extremely limited access to infor- mation about the outside world and only a vague idea about living conditions in neighbor- ing China and South Korea. Many Iranians, by contrast, are wired and can also communicate with relatives who live abroad; they have gone to school or worked abroad and know what they are missing.2 Few North Koreans have direct knowledge of life beyond their fortified borders. Still, as many as half the population now perceives glimmers of opulence elsewhere from smuggled DVDs and contacts with tourists. Meanwhile, some young women walk the streets of Pyongyang in high heels and miniskirts made in China from South Korean patterns.

North Korea’s population is less than a third of Iran’s, but its armed forces are twice the size. North Korea spends at least US$7 billion a year on defense, Iran US$11 billion. (By com- parison, South Korea outsplits North Korea 4 to 1, while Israel outspends Iran by about one- third.) North Korea has twice as many rocket launchers as Iran. It also has some nuclear war- heads, probably fewer than a dozen; Iran, for now, has none. Considering an overall indicator of military strength, the Global Firepower Index (www.globalfirepower.com/) ranks Iran as the 16th strongest military power and North Korea 29th (South Korea ranks 8th, Israel 13th). But regardless of the exact military balance, the con- ventional forces and geography of North Korea and Iran suffice to deter any plausible threat. Both countries need economic progress far more than nuclear arms.

AN IRAN DEAL IS MORE LIKELY

A wide-ranging accommodation with Iran should be far easier to reach than with North Korea. Iran can forgo nuclear weapons because its geopolitical and economic resources give it a commanding position in its region. North Korea, by contrast, is a speck on the map of East Asia. Apart from coal and some exotic minerals, its resources offer little to induce foreign investment or trade. Neither country needs to fear a foreign attack unless its nuclear weapons development provokes outsiders to mount a preventive or pre-emptive war. Unlike Iran, however, North Korea demands to be recognized as a nuclear-weapons state.

Another difference is that Americans and Ira- nians understand one another far better than do Americans and North Koreans. Both the Eng- lish and Persian languages share indo-european roots, while Korean has no ties to any Western language. A far larger share of Iranians knows English than do North Koreans. Many Iranians have relatives in the West. Many have studied or worked abroad.

Most Americans and Iranians, whether Zoro- astrian or Muslim or Bahá’í, believe that there is one God. Zoroastrianism was the first major monotheistic faith, and it fostered a belief, shared by most Christians, that the power of good must struggle endlessly against evil. Children of the same book as Jews and Christians, Muslims believe in Satan as well as Allah.
Phyllis Ackerman, edited a six-volume Survey of Persian Art in the 1930s. Having returned to Iran in the 1960s, they are buried in a gorgeous mausoleum in Isfahan.

Some Iranians also recall that US pressures at the United Nations helped to push Soviet occupation forces from northern Iran in 1946. Whatever positive thoughts Iranians had about Americans, however, were nearly erased by US involvement in the coup that restored the Pahlavi dynasty in 1953, and by US support for Iraq in the 1980s Iran-Iraq war, during which a US Navy ship shot down a commercial Iranian Airbus, killing nearly 300 people, including scores of children. Given the anti-American drumbeat of official propaganda, few Iranians understand that the impeachment of President Mohammad Mosadegh in the 1953 coup came from Iran’s middle classes and merchants, plus the clergy, who loathed his secularism.10

In 1998 Iranian President Mohammad Khatami sought “dialogue” instead of a clash between civilizations. That year I found myself addressing both diplomats and Islamic scholars in Tehran. The Iranian scholar who introduced my presentation later denounced my various “errors,” apparently for the record, but then gave a similar speech urging East-West reconciliation. My best rapport, however, emerged on a mountain-top overlooking the smoggy capital below. An off-duty colonel in the Iranian Army and I joined in urging two off-duty privates not to pollute their lungs and the mountain air by smoking.

Both positive and negative feelings toward the US also exist in Korea. North and South. Some Koreans recall that in 1882 their king concluded a treaty with Washington pledging each side to use its “good offices” if the other were threatened. Instead, however, Washington winked as Japan absorbed, occupied and exploited Korea from 1895 to 1945. Many North Koreans do not know that Kim Il Sung started the Korean war in 1950, but they are sure that US bombers flattened their country in the ensuing conflict. Compounding the misunderstandings, North Koreans have been taught that North Korean nukes are now a match for American nuclear weapons.

THE US: THREAT AND KEY

Leaders in Pyongyang and Tehran see the US as the greatest threat to their security, but also as a potential key to their economic advance. What does all this mean for the US and other governments struggling to halt and reverse the spread of nuclear weapons? Outsiders need to offer the revolutionary pariahs security for their regime and their country. The outlines of grand bargains to achieve this have already been sketched by Michael O’Hanlon, myself and others. Why did these proposals go nowhere? Often, the timing was wrong. When one side wanted a deal, the other was not ready. Or the offer was condescending or hostile in tone, disregarding Lenin’s advice to his diplomats in 1922: “Avoid poisonous [izdovitie] words!”

Mistimed or hostile also plays a role. Americans and North Korean negotiators appeared to reach a “Leap Day” deal on Feb. 29, 2012: arms control in exchange for nutritional supplements. American diplomats insist they warned the North Korean representatives that another space launch would scupper the arrangement. But this stipulation was not part of any written accord. The North’s diplomats may have failed to inform Kim Jong Un of this condition, or he may have decided to proceed hoping that Washington and the UN Security Council would ignore their own admonitions. Just two weeks after the Leap Day accord, Pyongyang announced it would send a satellite into space. On April 13, the North attempted (unsuccessfully) to launch a satellite and the deal was off, deflating any hopes for accommodation and inducing the UN Security Council to tighten its sanctions.11 Private US citizens also warned North Koreans that few State Department officials regard talking with Pyongyang as a way to boost their careers.

MODEST PROGRESS WITH IRAQ

“Face” is important to many if not all cultures. Many North Koreans and Iranians believe they have been treated unfairly. Sensitive to slights, they respond best in what Raymond Cohen calls a “high context” setting that listens to and respects each side, with time to nourish personal as well as professional relationships. Like North Koreans and Iranians, Russians have also felt insulted by intimations of Western superiority. Their sensitivities were mollified when US President John F. Kennedy praised the Soviet people in his “Strategy of Peace” speech on June 10, 1963, setting the stage for the nuclear test ban treaty. Kennedy initiated a process akin to what psychologist Charles Osgood called graduated reciprocation in tension reduction (GRIT), to which Khrushchev responded, developing what he later called “disarmament by mutual example.” (See my article “Hubris versus GRIT,” in the Summer 2013 issue of Global Asia.)

In late 2013 and early 2014, both Washington and Tehran seem to be embarked on a process of tension reduction. Believing that they have been duped in the past, however, US officials were cool toward resuming negotiations with North Korea, unless Pyongyang showed a commitment to denuclearization. GRIT and détente seems feasible between the United States and Iran, but not North Korea. Unlike Tehran’s new president, Kim Jong Un seems tone-deaf, having used Dennis Rodman, for example, to suggest that US President Barack Obama ring him in Pyongyang some time. The North might also think the leaders in Seoul and Washington tone-deaf, given how quickly they have brushed off North Korean calls for a new start.12

“High context” diplomacy is succeeding between Tehran and Washington. Between Pyongyang and Washington, it has barely been tried. North Koreans and Americans cannot forget their bloody encounters in 1950-1953 or their many confrontations since. Iran and the US, by contrast, have never been at war with each other. Their disputes have been less serious than those that drove the US-Soviet Cold War. Americans have far more in common with Iranians than with North Koreans. But will this heritage ease the task of negotiating the next steps and living with a more extensive agreement if one is signed? If Washington and Tehran can reach a long-term accommodation, what will be the impact on US-North Korean relations? If Iran’s leaders curtail their nuclear weapons program to get rid of sanctions, Kim Jong Un might regard them as naive and continue to pursue his country’s “military first” policy. Or might he halt nuclear and missile development if offered a convincing array of security assurances and economic incentives? If détente works for Tehran, could it not help North Korea also? We cannot know unless both sides want a deal, test the waters once more and give negotiators room and time to explore opportunities for mutual gain.

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