How Should Democrats Deal With Dictators?

By Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

The USSR, Libya and now North Korea have all posed one of the thorniest of diplomatic and ethical questions: should democratic leaders be prepared, for the sake of the greater good, to meet and negotiate with despots and leaders for whom terror and tyranny are a stock in trade?

In this article adapted by the author from his recent book, Getting to Yes in Korea, Walter C. Clemens, Jr, argues that holding your nose and getting close enough to talk is the best course.

FOLLOWING ANOTHER REBUKE by the UN Security Council and new sanctions for its missile test of April 13, 2009, North Korea declared that it was quitting the six-party talks and was again reprocessing plutonium. In reply, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told the House Foreign Affairs Committee on April 30 that the US had to be “strong, patient, persistent and not give in to the kind of back-and-forth, the unpredictable behavior of the North Korean regime.” She was defending a budget request for nearly $100 million for future US economic aid to North Korea if its leaders returned to the talks and began again to disable their nuclear capacity. China and Russia also advised patience, but Seoul and Tokyo worried that Washington might cut a deal with Pyongyang that bypassed them and their interests.¹

North Korea’s second nuclear explosion, in May 2009, pushed even China and Russia to endorse stronger sanctions from the United Nations. Even as South Korean authorities proposed a $40 billion prize for the North’s nuclear disarmament, Clinton likened North Koreans to “unruly children.” Pyongyang’s Foreign Ministry returned the insult in spades. In June 2009, however, Hillary’s husband, the former US president, paid a whirlwind visit to Pyongyang and talked with Kim Jong-il, raising hopes for a return to serious negotiations.
CRUCIAL QUESTIONS
Is it possible, useful, and even necessary for democratic polities to negotiate with authoritarian regimes? If so, should democratic leaders meet and negotiate with their opposite numbers? Can such negotiations usefully go beyond technical security arrangements to further accommodations? Is it wise for a democracy to try to engage rather than merely contain an authoritarian and sometimes aggressive regime?

To most of these questions, skeptics answer, “No.” They contend that most dictators proceed from a zero-sum orientation and sense no pressure from voters for peace. Skeptics warn that even if authoritarians sign an accord, they will feel free to break it if circumstances permit.

Other analysts, cautious but more hopeful, reply with a qualified “Yes.” They do not assume that all relationships are “win-win,” but when survival and other security issues are at stake, proponents of negotiation reckon that authoritarian regimes, no less than democratic governments, may find it necessary and useful to enter into and abide by arms and other agreements. Trying to minimize self-righteousness, they recall that democratic as well as authoritarian regimes may have violated previous commitments. To be sure, co-operation should be conditioned on reciprocity and monitoring. Conditional co-operators agree with President Ronald Reagan’s admonition in 1987: “Doverai no proveryai — trust but verify.” In fact, most US presidents have talked to “bad guys.”

George W. Bush in his first term was the exception. He virtually foreclosed negotiations when he demanded regime change in Baghdad, Teheran, and Pyongyang. Unlike US policies toward Moscow, Beijing, and Tripoli, Washington did very little to seek out and bolster those in Pyongyang who would be willing to break with the past and get to a yes with the outside world. Whatever voices for accommodation existed among North Korean elites, they were surely embarrassed if not silenced by the words and deeds of the Bush administration. Those of President Barack Obama’s administration in 2009-2010 may well have reminded Pyongyang of the French saying Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose (the more things change, the more they stay the same). Their first exchanges continued tit-for-tat.

THREE SETS OF ACCORDS WITH AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES
US negotiations with Moscow on arms control and other security issues began in the 1940s and have continued through into the 21st century. After many dead-ends, these interactions began to show promise in the late 1950s, and led to several limited accords in 1963-1964. These were followed by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) signed in 1968; the anti-ballistic missile and other strategic arms treaties in the 1970s; the far-reaching Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987; the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty in 1990; and the two strategic arms reduction treaties signed in 1991 and 1993. All US presidents save George W. Bush believed it worthwhile to negotiate and sign these accords.

More than a decade of bluster, fighting, and negotiation between Washington and Tripoli eventually produced a deal in 2003 under the terms of which Libya forswore weapons of mass destruction. Inspectors from the United states, United Kingdom and international organizations proceeded to dismantle Libya’s chemical and nuclear weapons programs, as well as its long-range ballistic missiles. Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control Stephen Rademaker on May 2, 2005 told the NPT Review Conference that Libya’s choice “demonstrates that, in a world of strong non-proliferation norms, it is never too late to make the decision to become a fully compliant NPT state.” He added that Tripoli’s decision was “amply rewarded.” Diplomatic relations between the United States and Libya, severed in 1981, were re-established in 2006.

While most Republican and Democratic leaders endorsed most of the arms treaties with the USSR, many highly placed Republicans challenged the value of any deals with North Korea. When the 1994 “agreed framework” deal fell apart in 2002, some cheered and said, “We warned you.”
CONFLICT AND ACCOMMODATION
What factors worked for or against these ac-
cords? Table 1 summarizes the main factors. For
the USSR and Libya, most of these factors proved
conducive to arms control or at least neutral.
Many of these same factors made North Korea far
more reluctant than the USSR or Libya to reduce
its military assets.

DEALING WITH THE USSR:
CONTAINMENT AND ENGAGEMENT
From about 1947 until 1954 the US sought to
contain rather than to engage the USSR. But
the Kremlin and Western leaders began efforts
to reduce Cold War tensions after Stalin’s death
in 1953. Starting in 1958, the US and USSR emb-
arked on a wide range of cultural and scientific
exchanges. America added engagement to con-
tainment in a grand strategy to moderate and
perhaps transform an authoritarian and often
dangerous regime.
Critics said that engagement would prolong the
Soviet dictatorship, while proponents of engage-
ment replied that Washington could not over-
throw the regime, but that closer interaction with
the West would promote system change. Looking
back, we see that détente made it easier for soviet
dissidents to speak out. Greater openness meant
that Western TV crews were present in Estonia,
Latvia, and Lithuania in the late 1980s and early
1990s, inhibiting soviet use of force to crush in-
dependence movements in the Baltic republics.
Fewer than 50 people were killed as the three re-
publics regained their independence.

### Table 1: Factors Shaping US Negotiations on Arms Control with Three Authoritarian Regimes

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>USSR</th>
<th>Libya</th>
<th>North Korea</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Military Balance</strong></td>
<td>Rough parity with US: nuclear deterrence after 1955 and,</td>
<td>Profound asymmetry and no deterrent</td>
<td>Inferiority but with conventional deterrence and prospect of a minimum nuclear deterrent</td>
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<td></td>
<td>by 1972, mutual overkill</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Economic Incentives</strong></td>
<td>Strong incentives to reduce military expenditures and end sanctions. Poor harvests and pressure to import food</td>
<td>Strong incentives to end sanctions and break from isolation</td>
<td>Heavy burden of military expenditures; frequent need to import food; pressure to end isolation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Technological Base</strong></td>
<td>Competitive with US but usually in catch-up position</td>
<td>Not competitive</td>
<td>Not competitive but with a core of dedicated scientists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domestic Politics</strong></td>
<td>Little effective opposition to détente within Politburo, but much grousing in the military-industrial complex</td>
<td>Elite support for accommodation with West and progressive reforms</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Potential Criticism From Partners</strong></td>
<td>Irrelevant after 1959-1963 break with China</td>
<td>Not relevant</td>
<td>Irrelevant after fall of Communism in USSR and China’s establishment of relations with South Korea</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Territorial Disputes</strong></td>
<td>Control over East Germany and Eastern Europe—less relevant as East Europeans did their own thing</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Domination of Korean peninsula—an increasingly remote and receding goal for Pyongyang and Seoul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Previous Bloodshed With United States</strong></td>
<td>Very little</td>
<td>Very little</td>
<td>Huge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mutual Understanding</strong></td>
<td>Much, thanks to cultural overlap and sometime co-operation</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Very little</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Verification Techniques</strong></td>
<td>Measures found to be acceptable</td>
<td>Acceptable</td>
<td>Not yet fully acceptable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diplomacy</strong></td>
<td>Constructive blend of secret and public</td>
<td>Blend</td>
<td>Blend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude to Co-operation With the Adversary</strong></td>
<td>Gradual mellowing of zero-sum outlook</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Zero-sum roots</td>
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GLOBAL ASIA Feature Essay How Should Democrats Deal With Dictators?
Closer ties also meant greater mutual vulnerability. President George H.W. Bush warned Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that Soviet repression of Lithuania’s independence movement would compel the US to freeze “many elements of our economic relationship, including Export-Import credit guarantees, Commodity Credit Co-operation credit guarantees, support for ‘Special Associate Status’ for the Soviet Union in the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank; and most of our technical assistance programs.”

America’s experiences with the Soviet Union during its final decade are relevant to US and South Korean dealings with North Korea. During the first half of the 1980s, the Kremlin was headed by three elderly and ailing Party leaders with whom Reagan made little effort to negotiate. Things changed after Gorbachev took the helm in 1985. Reagan and Gorbachev met several times and arrived at far-reaching agreements — an orientation that was continued in l988-1991 by George H. W. Bush. The Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the USSR disintegrated in late 1991.

Self-proclaimed realists and neo-realists contend that Reagan and his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) beat the USSR into submission and collapse. If their analysis is correct, it might follow that the US should also use hard power to compel Pyongyang into submission. But the facts do not support this interpretation of history. The SDI did not spur détente. Had there been no promises of a missile-proof astrodome over America, Soviet proponents of détente would have had a greater influence. It was when Soviet leaders perceived how remote the threat from Star Wars was that Gorbachev entered into the INF treaty and other arms controls. What did help to end the Cold War was the chemistry between Gorbachev and Reagan. Each convinced the other that he wanted peace and large-scale arms reductions. Had either refused dialogue, both countries might have continued on the collision course of the early 1980s. The Soviet empire might not have ended with so little violence.

Apart from formal exchanges, Western governments and private parties also provided a “Marshall Plan for the mind” to Soviet bloc intellectuals and professionals. One of its architects, George C. Minden, opined that the West did not face “Marxist obstacles, but a vacuum,” and that the West should do “something against frustration and stultification, against a life full of omissions. “Over the 37 years of its existence, Minden’s CIA-financed International Literary Centre delivered 10 million Western books and magazines to Eastern Europe and the USSR — 300,000 in 1991. Fully a third of the recipients in later years wrote thank-you letters.

Trying to foster better understanding, the Asia Foundation has sent 120,000 books to North Korea — some 9,000 a year. Authorities there prefer books on science and English teaching, but the foundation includes books on humanities, social science and law as well. A visitor to Pyongyang witnessed a student simulation of a US banker talking to a small-businessman seeking a loan. The visitor found many well-thumbed books donated by the foundation at the Foreign Studies University. But most books go to the Grand People’s Study House, a sort of national library; some go to other institutions. Faculty members have easy access to these books; availability to students is less certain. In earlier decades, the foundation delivered two million books to South Korea.

North Korea also invited and hosted the New York Philharmonic in February 2008, but Washington provided no tit-for-tat. On the other hand, North Korean diplomats at the United Nations have sometimes turned down invitations to discussions with American students and academics. The North Korean Mission to the UN did not reply to a letter I sent proposing a visit to Pyongyang to exchange views with academics there.

INSIGHTS FROM LIBYA
Washington’s experiences with Libya, as well as with Communist regimes, suggest lessons for dealing with perceived adversaries on the world stage. Bush administration officials sometimes suggested that North Korea should emulate Libya by dismantling its nuclear facilities and renouncing terrorism. President George W. Bush and Vice
President Dick Cheney credited the changes in Libya to the (initial) successes of the US invasion of Iraq. But Washington treated Tripoli much differently than it did Pyongyang. Different inputs yielded different results.

US policy toward Libya went through three phases: First, the Reagan administration relied on hard-line pressures — including bombing — to intimidate the Libyan government and perhaps kill its leader, Muammar Gaddafi. Second, the first George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton administrations mixed coercion with multilateral diplomacy. This blend helped initiate secret US-UK negotiations with Tripoli that produced positive outcomes in 1999 and continued under the George W. Bush administration in 2003.7

The winning approach balanced credible force (economic sanctions as well as military threat) with deft diplomacy — and did so consistent with three criteria: proportionality, reciprocity and coercive capability. Washington demanded major policy changes of Libya but not regime change. It exploited the willingness of domestic elites in Libya to act as a “transmission belt” pressing the top leader to move the country into the international community. Indeed, the Libyan case even suggested that rogue nations can be reformed when the top leader believes his regime can be better preserved by integration than by isolation.

Taking on the mantle of peacemaker, Gaddafi penned his “One-State Solution” for Israeli-Palestinian differences in a New York Times op-ed on January 21, 2009. The Financial Times in March 2009 carried stories headlined “Libya eyes more property in west” and “Private equity firms beat path to Tripoli.” In July 2009 Gaddafi, once denounced by Reagan as a “mad dog,” supped on pasta just two seats away from Obama at the Group of Eight summit in Italy and even secured a handshake with the US president. He attended the summit as president of the African Union. In August, however, when Libyans gave a hero’s welcome to the convicted Lockerbie bomber, released from a Scottish jail on humanitarian grounds, Gaddafi again looked like the rogue’s rogue to many Westerners.

US attempts over many decades to isolate politically and economically the USSR and other targeted countries — China, Cuba, Libya, Iran — all failed to alter significantly the policies or character of their regimes. When Washington shifted to an engagement strategy, however, it normalized relations with Moscow, Beijing and Tripoli, setting the stage for broader accords useful to each party. Only when Washington offered positive incentives as well as threats did it enhance American objectives. By contrast, nearly half a century of unremitting pressure against Fidel Castro’s Cuba deprived the US and Cuban citizens of many potential benefits.

WHY NORTH KOREA IS HARDER THAN THE USSR OR LIBYA

Reviewing the factors outlined above in Table 1, we can understand better why it has been much more difficult to reach an accord with Pyongyang than with Moscow or Tripoli.

• Military Balance: Moscow has had a credible nuclear deterrent since the mid-1950s and strategic redundancy overkill since the late 1960s. The Kremlin could (and still can) give up a lot of its weapons and still retain a deterrent. At the opposite extreme, Libya had few military assets to surrender. With hardly any hope of developing or assembling its own weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Libya has almost no coercive leverage except more terrorist acts.

North Korea, though much poorer than Libya, has a relatively strong military — its ace in bargaining. The regime relies on military assets for defense, for deterrence, for intimidation, for bargaining and for prestige. North Korea has deployed conventional forces able to maim the South in a first-strike or a retaliatory blow. It has had large fleets of transport planes and helicopters capable of infiltrating at least two air force sniper brigades and assault forces deep into South Korean rear areas.10 For nearly two decades it has been close to having the materials and know-how to make nuclear weapons. It tested a nuclear device in 2006 and another in 2009 and claimed to have “weaponized” some of its plutonium. Whether the tests fizzled or not, whether or not the country had any deliverable nuclear weapons, the regime claimed
to have entered the nuclear weapons club. For North Korea to surrender its nuclear and missile capabilities without major compensation could undermine the regime’s legitimacy and spur dissent within the ruling elite.¹¹

• **Past bloodshed and destruction:** The USSR and Libya lost very few lives fighting the US, but North Korea lost more than a million civilians and soldiers in the Korean War. Memories of the conflict reinforced by intermittent US threats to employ nuclear weapons or wage preventive war make North Korea reluctant to disarm and trust Americans. Real hurts in the past have been magnified and kept alive by propaganda that emphasized US rapaciousness. The North Korean public knows almost nothing about the real origins of the Korean War, its aftermath or its legacy.

• **Economic pressures:** The USSR and today’s Russia could and can bargain not only with military overkill but also with material resources needed by the West: oil, gas and precious metals. American oil production began to fall in the 1970s at the same time as European demands for imported gas became more urgent. The Reagan administration tried to impede construction of gas pipelines from Russia to Europe, but it failed, and today Europe shivers when Russia closes the spigot. Libya also has oil and gas needed by the West. Of course, dependency also cuts both ways. Russia and Libya have raw materials needed by the West, but Moscow and Tripoli also need income from selling their commodities. Vendors and buyers need one another.

North Korea, by contrast, has very little economic leverage. It has minerals, but most can be obtained from other suppliers. For several decades, North Korea obtained hard currency by counterfeiting US dollars and engaging in the drug trade. If peace prevailed, North Korean territory could be used to pipe oil and gas from Siberia to South Korea and China. But this would be a prolonged and expensive undertaking. For now, North Korea could open more special economic zones where South Koreans and other foreigners can exploit the skills and low wages of North Korean workers. Even though North Korea derived hard currency from such projects in the last decade, it has often treated them with casual disdain. In 2008 it expelled many South Koreans and limited tourism from the south. Though faced with much worse economic straits than the USSR or Libya, the Pyongyang leadership often defied conventional economic logic.

All three countries — the USSR, Libya and North Korea — suffered from economic sanctions imposed by the US and backed by some of its allies. Having much larger cash reserves than Pyongyang, both the USSR and Libya could endure or circumvent these sanctions more readily than North Korea. In this sense, Pyongyang had a greater incentive to reach an accommodation with Washington so as to reduce barriers to trade and technology transfer. This incentive deepened in the 1990s when North Korea’s long-time benefactors in Moscow and Beijing withdrew or reduced their subsidies. As Russia and China became more businesslike, they multiplied trade ties with South Korea.

Apart from technology, the USSR often needed food from the West. As we saw earlier, the first nuclear arms control took place in 1963 when
the USSR imported wheat from the US. The John F. Kennedy administration treated it as a concession to permit wheat exports to the Soviet Union. Many subsequent arms-control deals between Moscow and Washington coincided with poor Soviet harvests — an intriguing correlation, if not causation. American farmers came to depend on Soviet purchases and Russia on US exports.

North Korea has been even more dependent on food imports than the USSR or the current Russian Federation. A large fraction of North Koreans have been chronically undernourished since the 1950s. Acute hunger was widespread for several years in the 1990s and again in the early 21st century. Oil to heat buildings and power factories and vehicles has also been in short supply. Just as a bad harvest reinforced Moscow’s willingness to sign a nuclear test ban in 1963, a poor harvest in North Korea coincided with its signing the Agreed Framework with Washington in 1994.

Considering North Korea’s desperate economic problems, then, outsiders may marvel at Pyongyang’s insensitivity in the six-party talks. Pyongyang has made concessions, but it has also held out for better terms and has sometimes backtracked.

The North Korean leadership did not buckle under economic pressure. Committed to the state juche ideology, it praised and prized self-reliance. The regime demanded priority for the military in allocation of resources and allowed the public to scrounge and even starve while the top elite lived in comfort. Thought control and the secret police made active dissent nearly impossible. Propaganda blamed shortfalls on American imperialism.

The more authoritarian the regime, the less there is any prospect for visible public demands for higher living standards or freedom. Democracies, by contrast, take steps to make sure their people do not starve. As dictatorship weakened in the USSR and Eastern Europe, pressures for change rose. Public yearning for peace and higher living standards permitted the top leader to claim victory when he signed arms-control deals with the US. Stalin ruled for some 30 years; Khrushchev for 10; Brezhnev for 18; Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, each less than two; Gorbachev for six. Boris Yeltsin held sway (or swayed) for nearly a decade, and Putin ruled (without swaying) for more than a decade.

In recent decades, the ups and downs of the oil industry have shaped politics in the USSR/Russia and in Libya. When petrodollars flow, regimes can buy popularity; when they ebb, dissidence rises.

In Libya, domestic politics are also complicated by differences among tribes and between town and country, secular modernists and traditionalists, a wealthy few and the poor multitude. There is also a widening generation gulf, complicated by rifts between educated pragmatists and religious zealots.

Withal, Gaddafi has ruled for some 40 years since seizing power in a 1969 military coup. His sons appear to have encouraged his Westward orientation — dramatically signaled by his cautious support for the US coalition against Iraq in 1991. Regardless of pressures from Washington, however, the Libyan regime continued to crush dissent from within.

Like Gaddafi, Kim Il-sung had to fight off and purge rivals. But he and his son have ruled North Korea for more than half a century. One of Kim Jong-il’s sons or another relative may continue the dynasty. The dynasts’ dictatorship has been nearly total, though modern technology can weaken as well as buttress central controls. The patriarchs must contend with interest groups that oppose or support some forms of liberalization.

Comparing North Korea’s top leaders with those in other authoritarian regimes, as in Table 2
above, we see that they have more reasons to resist arms control and détente than past leaders in the USSR or China.

- **Cultural factors:** It has been easier for Americans to understand and deal with Soviet leaders than with those whose languages and cultures arise from different civilizations. Russia’s Orthodox heritage, though different in many ways from Western Christianity, is much closer to Western traditions than are the historic paths of Libya and Korea. Most college-educated Americans have been exposed to Russian literary classics and some to Russian ballet and classical music, but very few to the diverse influences shaping Libya or Korea. Most educated Russians are quite familiar with Western culture, even if they have never traveled abroad. Relatively few Libyans and even fewer North Koreans have been exposed to Western ways.

Americans tend to be low-context negotiators focused on the bottom line. US diplomat Christopher Hill compared diplomats to basketball
players — each wants to score baskets. Libyans and North Koreans tend to be more concerned with the total context, and they rely on personal ties built up over time. Professionals such as Hill, Robert L. Gallucci and their North Korean counterparts probably surmounted these stereotypes and learned how to accommodate one another’s peculiarities. But the George W. Bush administration’s frequent slights to Asian “face” and outright insults made it harder to come to terms with Pyongyang. Washington’s reluctance to deal with top North Korean leaders probably obstructed momentum toward a deal.

A second cultural distinction is that US diplomats tend to be more optimistic, more confident that problems can be solved, than those from authoritarian states and cultures. Americans trust that if all parties are sincere, they can create mutually beneficial accords that open doors to broader cooperation. Far from expecting mutual gain, many authoritarians tend to see all politics as a zero-sum struggle. This outlook prevailed for long periods in the USSR and Libya and lives on in North Korea.

Dining with Dictators?
Should top leaders of democracies deal one-on-one with despots? There are strong grounds to oppose such meetings. First, heads of state seldom have the time or detailed knowledge needed to negotiate security agreements. Many foreign policy experts believe it wiser to let experts work out the details of any such deal before inviting heads of state to sign off on a final document. Second, democrats may lose moral stature if they treat dictators — especially mass murderers — as equals.

Western liberals could only blanche when Richard Nixon toasted Mao Zedong in 1972. The political realist and publicity-seeking Nixon did not object to smiling for photos with a man responsible for at least 30 million unnecessary deaths. We cannot say if the Nixon-Mao encounter was needed for Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai to work out the terms of normalization. But history suggests that the many summits between Soviet and US leaders left a very mixed record — some benefit but also much damage to American and world security.

DANGERS AT THE SUMMIT
The wartime meetings of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill with Stalin sustained the war against Germany but failed to resolve many important issues (access to Berlin, reparations). They gave rise to some wishful thinking (on liberated Europe) and aggravated mutual suspicions. The 1955 Geneva summit probably convinced leaders from the four countries that none wanted a nuclear war. But Khrushchev’s two visits to the US and his confrontation with President Dwight Eisenhower at the Paris summit stirred up more animosity than good will. Khrushchev’s Vienna meeting with Kennedy in 1961 emboldened Khrushchev to send missiles to Cuba but did not prepare him for the steely US response. The meetings between Nixon and Brezhnev in 1972 and 1973 and between President Jimmy Carter and Brezhnev in 1979 added only an illusory veneer to the detailed accords worked out by foreign policy experts. Brezhnev’s visit to San Clemente to see Nixon did not prevent a serious confrontation later in 1973. Carter’s meeting with Brezhnev in 1979 did not prepare the White House for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The bonhomie of George H. W. Bush and Clinton with Boris Yeltsin gained little for any party. Better policies on the ground might have done more than showy...
summits to help Russia shift from communism to economic and political freedom. Encounters between George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin generated more misunderstanding and animus than long-term collaboration. Still, Reagan’s meetings with Gorbachev led to several arms accords and a peaceful end to the Cold War. Talks between the chief US and Soviet diplomats, George Shultz and Eduard Shevardnadze, defined the fine print implicit in their presidents’ entente.

Perhaps negotiations with authoritarian are too important to be left to heads of state. Even Kissinger may have been too political and insufficiently professional to handle the nuclear arms reduction (SALT I) negotiations in 1971-1972. America’s interests probably would have been better served if the dialogue with Moscow had been carried on by diplomats such as George F. Kennan, Charles Bohlen, Raymond Garthoff, and Jack F. Matlock — each was a master of Russian language and culture as well as the technical issues of arms control, and each understood the big picture as well as the importance of adding or omitting a comma in the text.

People who see Obama as the hope for humanity might cringe if he shook hands with a Kim Jong-il, a Vladimir Putin, a Mu'amamar Gaddafi, or a Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. If each side’s deep interests push them to an accord, is staged amiability necessary or desirable? Still, there is a case to be made for summit diplomacy. First, a meeting at the highest level may be necessary to break a cycle of hostility and open the way to normal relations between dangerous adversaries. Authoritarian leaders tend to limit the scope of their diplomats. Dictators want the final say and publicity for themselves. Both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il indicated often that they wanted to deal with their opposite numbers in Washington. It may be that for Koreans, as Stephen Linton put it: “Proof of interest at the highest level is paramount for giving the negotiating process legitimacy.”

The role of Jimmy Carter in breaking the momentum toward war with North Korea in 1994 appeared to confirm Linton’s thesis. As president, Carter mediated the 1978 Camp David peace accords. Private citizen Carter became the world’s best-known and most successful mediator in the 1980s and 1990s. Carter believed judgments about the participants should be left outside the meeting room. A mediator should focus the disputants on whether an agreement can advance their interests. “People in conflict have to be willing to talk about ending it, or at least changing it, and there has to be someone willing to talk to them, however odious they are — and that’s where I come in.”

Critics objected to the ex-president’s meddling in government affairs and his willingness to get friendly and personal with dictators. If results count, however, the record shows that Carter’s interventions helped Nicaragua achieve a peaceful transition to democracy and persuaded Haiti’s junta to leave office peacefully. But Carter’s greatest achievement was to turn the US and North Korea away from war and outline terms for their official framework agreement in 1994.

Both Carter and Kim Il-sung believed in high-level contacts. If Kim Il-sung could not meet the existing president, he seemed anxious to meet with an ex-president, one who as president had reduced the US troop presence in South Korea. Many observers were surprised that a part-time Baptist preacher could find any rapport with a Communist dictator. But Carter’s faith acknowledged that no humans or regimes are perfect. For his part, Kim Il-sung had enjoyed a positive relationship with his grandmother, a Presbyterian. He permitted some Christian observances in North Korea so long they did not obstruct the regime’s economic and political programs.

When Madeleine Albright met Kim Jong-il in 2000, he expressed the hope that President Clinton would visit, saying that “if both sides are genuine and serious, there is nothing we will not be able to do.”

Some leaders may find their opposite number so repulsive they find it difficult to talk with them. George W. Bush said that he loathed Kim Jong-il, but he relented enough in December 2007 to write a letter to him addressed as “Dear Mr. Chairman.”

Rejecting a mere former US vice president, Al Gore, Kim Jong-il sought and got a visit from former president Clinton in June 2009 as part of a deal in which Pyongyang released two im-
prisoned US journalists (leaving many captured South Koreans, including fishermen who strayed too far northwards, without immediate succor).

How vital is interaction at the summit? This is part of a set of larger questions: What is the role of individual free will relative to great forces in history? How important are “principals” (such as presidents) and “agents” (such as diplomats) relative to “structure”? Profoundly inefficient, the Soviet system was bound to collapse, but when and how?

Individuals played crucial roles. Had Yegor Ligachev or some other leader been at the helm rather than Gorbachev, the Cold War might not have ended so peacefully. Had Reagan not agreed to meet with Gorbachev, the two would not have developed a kind of mutual trust.

Had Jimmy Carter not studied all the issues in great depth and traveled to Pyongyang in 1994 accepting the positive, the confrontation might have become more intense. Fortune was also at play. Had Kim Il-sung’s death occurred several weeks earlier, Carter might have met no one except some stolid foreign ministry officials afraid to budge.

In 2010, Kim Jong-il took the train to Beijing even as ex-President Carter arrived in Pyongyang on a mission to plead for the release of an aspiring American evangelist.

Like Jimmy Carter, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, the former South Korean foreign minister who became UN Secretary-General in 2007, also believes in dialogue with the world’s tough guys. Some UN diplomats castigated Ban as “spineless” and said that his “grubby compromises” (for example, with Sri Lanka and Burma) have eroded the moral authority of the UN. Ban sits down with bad guys and gets nothing in return, said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. Ban maintained, however, that his “quiet diplomacy” could nudge the most recalcitrant leaders to mend their ways. He claimed to have pried open the door for aid workers in cyclone-ravaged Burma, gotten thousands of international peacekeepers into Darfur and helped raise the international profile of climate change. “It is human relationships which can make a difference,” Ban told reporter Colum Lynch (Washington Post, September 1, 2009).

**THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HANDLING NORTH KOREA**

Smart power in dealing with North Korea requires tapping the full range of tools: “diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal and cultural — [and] picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each occasion.” Effective negotiation with Pyongyang will require interagency coordination in Washington, coordination with allies and other stakeholders, as well as great skill in negotiating.

Underlying conditions set the context, but individuals still shape negotiations and make the final decisions. The structure of US-North Korean relations makes it important and feasible for Washington and Pyongyang — backed by their four negotiating partners — to come together in ways that enhance the deepest interests of each side. A way had to be found for Washington and Pyongyang to negotiate bilaterally but within a framework that secures the blessing and support of Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo and Moscow. Professional diplomats should work out the details. If six foreign ministers sign the relevant documents, the moral complications for any democratic signatory would be lessened. If a summit meeting is the price of peace, the US president should meet with the top North Korean leader to seal the deal.

Yes, democrats can and should try to deal with authoritarians. The way to get them to “yes,” a former US ambassador believes, is not to preach morality or history but show them how the deal could advance their interests.

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NOTES
1 Russia’s Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, said the UN sanctions were not constructive. Still, he received a cold nody when he visited Pyongyang in April 2009 and tried to persuade North Korean leaders to return to the six-party talks. Nonetheless, he advised: “We should not give way to emotions, instead we should concentrate on what we have already achieved.”
2 Leslie Linkin quoted in Darius Furmonavicius, “The Library, Princeton University, MC#197, Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript
3 Nonetheless, he advised: “We should not give way to emotions, instead we should concentrate on what we have already achieved.”
5 Douglas Martin, “George C. Minden, October 17, 1986.”
6 Books Open Doors in North Korea,” undated report by Edward Reed, Korea representative of the Asia Foundation. For the full picture, see http://www.asiafoundation.org/program/overview/books-asia, accessed 05/12/09.
8 Tripoli’s disarmament was also a success story for the US intelligence community, which uncovered and halted some of the assistance Libya was being provided by the nuclear smuggling network led by Pakistani nuclear official Abdul Qadeer Khan. Goddall’s son stated that the December 19, 2003 agreement between the US was a “win-win” deal for both sides. “Our leader believed that if this problem were solved, Libya would emerge from the international isolation and become a negotiator and work with the big powers to change the Arab situation.”
16 Donald Gregg, president of the Korea Society, conversation on February 7, 2009.