Efforts to engage North Korea are, to put it mildly, stalled. The Six-Party Talks are on ice, and there appears little on the horizon to suggest a thaw.

The rut in which the world finds itself in its attempts to draw Pyongyang into the international community are a consequence of failed approaches to engaging North Korea in the past, writes Seok-Hyun Hong. He argues that it’s time to broaden the paths towards engagement.
ALTHOUGH THERE was much speculation that a breakthrough in North-South relations might be in the offing after high-ranking North Korean officials made an impromptu visit to the Asian Games at Incheon in October 2014, tensions of late have ratcheted up again, especially after the United States imposed further sanctions in response to allegations that North Korea was behind the hacking of Sony Pictures. Now, with talks of designating North Korea again as a sponsor of terrorism, there is concern that another period of heightened tensions is about to begin.

But might it not be a smarter strategy to create a virtuous rather than a vicious cycle, one that could turn this all-too-predictable process around? The true lesson of the recent uptick in tensions is not that we should increase pressure on Pyongyang, but rather that we have to move beyond the current approach to engagement with North Korea.

For the last 20 years, South Korea and its partners have engaged North Korea through a variety of limited forums such as the Six-Party Talks, reunions for family members separated on either side of the DMZ and limited humanitarian activities by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). As the world is rapidly transformed by globalization, the tremendous potential of East Asia is being slowed down by this inability to fully integrate North Korea into the international community. The time has come for a creative and broad approach to engaging North Korea.

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As China emerges as a truly global power and the US tries to define its rebalancing in Asia, this is a critical moment for creating a broad dialogue with Pyongyang that includes more actors, and offers more potential directions for future development. This essay provides an overall analysis of the current situation and presents a few concrete proposals for innovative engagement that can change the way current problems are perceived. By changing these perceptions, the foundation can be laid for a more fundamental institutional integration of the region that reflects the economic realities of this century. The first step is to change the manner in which we engage North Korea.

The pairing of denuclearization with regime change as part of the engagement policy has to change. When Pyongyang is certain we are not seeking regime change, it will be sincere about discussing its nuclear program.

Nuclear arms symbolize North Korea’s self-reliance and independence, which means there are both domestic and external reasons why Pyongyang will not lightly abandon them. Although this program is expensive and risky, and has led to the country’s further isolation from the international community, North Koreans suggest that nuclear weapons are their cheapest approach to self-defense under the current economic circumstances.

FRUSTRATED TALKS

Since 2003, when the second North Korea nuclear crisis saw the 1994 US-DPRK Agreed Framework unravel and North Korea withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Six-Party Talks have served as the primary mechanism for engaging North Korea. The talks served a purpose: any form of dialogue is better than none. But the parties have not met since 2008 and the talks are far from satisfactory. The same can be said of the seemingly more successful prior decade of engagement (1994-2003).

One problem, admitted in memoirs subsequently published by several participants, is that the United States’ acceptance of the Agreed Framework was based on a mix of misapprehension and bad faith. Washington’s willingness to postpone making North Korea come clean on its past plutonium production, and its generosity in agreeing to send fuel oil and (with other peoples’ money) build two light water reactors, was the backdrop of the complex political games that he was playing in order to stay in power. The bottom line is that if he cannot find a way to improve relations with South Korea and the Western world, he will not have the resources and the time to improve the lives of his people. The challenges for North Korea remain significant, and we cannot expect this inexperienced leader to have much free time to explore new initiatives.
Another issue that has greatly affected engagement with North Korea in the past year or so is a stronger focus on human rights abuses. Of course, the issue of human rights has to be pursued, but the key question is how. As with the nuclear issue, a punitive, threatening approach — “if these issues are not resolved, then you will be punished” — is likelier to trigger a backlash than to succeed. No country has a perfect human rights record, and indeed, North Korea is one of the worst offenders. The international community must press North Korea on human rights violations, but this is only one of many issues that need to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. It would be perverse and self-defeating to repeat the mistake that was made with the nuclear issue: prioritizing a single issue in a way that obstructs rather than expedites broader engagement, thereby slowing down a negotiation process that could put in place new mechanisms that will improve the lives of ordinary people in North Korea.

A fresh approach to engaging North Korea is urgently needed. Nothing said above is meant to downplay the seriousness of its nuclear program from South Korea’s viewpoint. We can never wholly rule out a ghastly nuclear conflagration, and there are other tangible risks and costs. A nuclear North Korea forces us to spend much of our resources unnecessarily on defense, and it could also drive Japan to develop nuclear weapons. It is a race against the clock and if Pyongyang is certain we are not seeking capabilities, and convinced that nuclear armament is the cheapest way to achieve their goals. So the safety of the regime needs to be guaranteed even without a nuclear arsenal. At the same time, a benefit package needs to be available that would make the gradual dismantling of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal appealing. That discussion has yet to take place. No doubt they may cheat in the short term, as in the past. Yet, it would seem that if we operate in good faith, North Korea will be relieved to find another way to stay afloat without nuclear weapons. The pairing of denuclearization with regime change as part of the engagement policy has to change. When Pyongyang is certain we are not seeking regime change, it will be sincere about discussing its nuclear program.

Creative Engagement
Maintaining dialogue with North Korea, using various means of communication, is the critical factor. We must ensure that such a dialogue is ongoing and consistent, taking place at some level constantly, regardless of the state of tension between the two Koreas. If dialogue becomes permanent, in the long run its scope and depth will inevitably grow. North Korea’s mentality will not change overnight; meaningful change requires consistency over time. Eventually, if trust can be built up through this process of continuous dialogue and communication, a platform for resolving outstanding issues will be created. For that reason, contacts between civilian groups should continue regardless of domestic politics. Such a policy of continuous dialogue would build trust between North and South Korea, and could extend to humanitarian, religious, and cultural areas. Religious groups, both Christian and Buddhist, are deeply involved in humanitarian efforts to help North Korea. That effort has been joined by a range of NGOs, as well as overseas Koreans. But we need to do much more. We need cultural exchanges — music concerts, festivals, sporting events and educational programs — that will break down the walls between the two countries.

If the North allows its citizens to visit the South, that would improve relations between the two Koreas. Soccer tournaments and other sports events are an excellent means to encourage exchanges, as the recent Asian Games hosted in Incheon showed. Concerts and other artistic events can do much to build closer relations. Initially, no doubt, North Korea will demand money in return, but that is a reality that we have to accept, as we have in the past.

The limit imposed by South Korean authorities on travel by its citizens to the North is the easiest problem to solve. If Seoul would simply change its policy, tremendous progress could result. Government authorities are trying to save face: they think they must hold out for an apology for North Korea’s past actions. But despite the tragedy and sensitivity of the 2010 sinking of the Cheonan, for example, what is gained by dwelling on it and waiting for an apology that will never come? There are ways to get North Korea to offer some words of regret about the incident and the casualties. A statement to the effect that such incidents will not happen again could be forthcoming, if the negotiations are handled appropriately.

Kimchi Diplomacy?
We must also create an enduring, permanent and parallel track for major non-political, pan-national projects, which are the real sinews of Korea’s future reunification. Reforestation is a case in point, and an obvious place to start. Making North Korea green again is a vital task that will take decades and require a great deal of expertise and resources. Former South Korean Prime Minister Goh Kun has been deeply involved in this issue, which has important knock-on effects and linkages to farming and beyond. Restoration of forest cover in North Korea will combat soil erosion and help preserve topsoil. Washington may need to focus on the nuclear issue, but it can surely understand why Seoul needs to advance on a wider front. And we have so much to offer in expertise and technical know-how on environmental issues and agriculture. South Korea has the human resources: the experts who ran South Korea’s highly successful agricultural programs and reforestation in the 1960s and 1970s. Now retired, they have the time and will to work on the same problems in the North.

Even our national dish can serve as a bridge between North and South. Currently, Seoul imports much of its kimchi from China. Why can’t we start bringing it over from North Korea? South Korea could provide technology, know-how and fertilizer to North Korea, while providing a very solid market. We would not have to worry about the problem of pesticides that arises in the case of kimchi from China. Moreover, South Korea could rent the land and thereby introduce more modern agricultural economics to North Korea. Along the way, the building of kimchi factories in North Korea would help develop advanced technology for kimchi production.

Finally, engagement with the North’s Korean People’s Army (KPA) must be handled delicately, of course. They need to be lured to the table with economic incentives aimed directly at the military. Actually, the North Korean military has been doing business with South Korea in one form or another for a long time and if such arrangements can be formalized, new mutually beneficial win-win structures can emerge. It is important to be realistic about the real
options. The KPA is a power in Pyongyang — perhaps less so now under Kim Jong Un, so the army may be all the more open to constructive offers — and it cannot be excluded from any real engagement process. South Korea must make an offer that is so compelling that even though the KPA understands the implications and risks, its leaders will feel compelled to go along with it anyway. Former President Kim Dae-jung advocated such an approach in his Sunshine Policy, and he had some success. Though Pyongyang was fully aware of Seoul’s intentions in the Sunshine Policy, it nevertheless could not resist participating in it.

But if we think about the question in a more innovative manner, there is no reason why the US military could not be involved in some part of the military-to-military dialogue between North and South. In fact, there could even be a dialogue involving military representatives from the US, South Korea and North Korea, on a new and forward-looking basis, rather than the long-standing Military Armistice Commission meetings at Panmunjom, which North Korea has effectively undermined.

FINAL STEPS TOWARD INTEGRATION
Whatever people may speculate, we do not and cannot know exactly when and how Korean unification will come about. All we can do is to make preparations to ensure that this would be based on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence and co-operation. It is unrealistic to expect that North Korea would consider dismantling its nuclear arsenal until it feels that its security is guaranteed and that prosperity will grow as it demilitarizes.

Of course, that process will take time and will involve conflicts and difficult negotiations. But as we have surely learned the hard way by now, it would be naive to assume that the Pyongyang regime will collapse very soon. Besides, a sudden collapse would not be desirable for either side. Hence, we need to maintain progress in dialogue and exchanges that will lead eventually to the North Korean leadership and people acknowledging that they will benefit by giving up the military component of their strategy.

Pyongyang’s signals are often mixed, and 2014 has seen many ups and downs. But if one reads each side’s more positive proposals carefully, there is enough common ground between, say, President Park Geun-hye’s Dresden Declaration and the North Korean National Defense Commission’s Liberation Day statement, to form a basis for concrete progress.

We should be bolder in exploring such possibilities. In 1945, no Korean could have imagined that the “temporary” partition imposed on the country by foreign powers would last seven decades. Future generations will not forgive us if, through inertia or fear, we allow this wound to become permanent.

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