How to Deal With Kim Jong Un

Policy Options Toward North Korea

By Walter C. Clemens, Jr.

In dealing with North Korea, Washington has a range of options, from strategic patience to wishing the problem away to traditional deterrence and containment. None of these have resulted in a good outcome for North Korea, the US or the region, writes Walter C. Clemens, Jr. That leaves engagement and negotiation, difficult as they are, as still the best way forward.
HOW TO DEAL with a regime that seems to break all the rules, endangering its own subjects and the world? The United States and its partners face 10 major options, as set out on the previous page. A successful policy would need to address what Thucydides portrayed as the basic drivers of foreign policy: the quest for honor, security and material gain. The most promising route to arms control and human security in North Korea, as in the Soviet Union at one time and now Iran, is to engage and explore ways in which to create value for all stakeholders.

1 More Strategic Patience
The administration of US President Barack Obama offered to negotiate with North Korea if Pyongyang demonstrated a willingness to honor its earlier commitments to denuclearization. After the “Leap Day” accord of 2012 blew up with a North Korean rocket launch, US officials felt cheated or rebuffed. Washington waited to see what would happen next. The advantage to strategic patience was that it spared the US whatever psychic and material burdens that would result from a more active policy. The downside was that, while Washington passively waited, Pyongyang improved its weapons of mass destruction and continued to repress its subjects.

2 Ignore North Korea
Could the US and other democracies ignore North Korea and hope that its actions and troubles won’t disturb the rest of the world? Since the 1870s, Washington has usually assigned a very low priority to Korea and devoted far more attention and resources to China, Russia, Japan and at times Indochina and the Middle East. In June 1950, however, the administration of Harry Truman concluded that US security was intimately connected with Korea. The George W. Bush and Obama administrations preferred to look the other way, ignoring dangers that did not yet explode on their doorstep.

The US has often refused to recognize regimes it did not like. However, the non-recognition of these regimes brought no evident benefit to their peoples or to the US. The greatest abuses in Mao Zedong’s China occurred in the three decades before the Carter White House established diplomatic relations with China in 1979. The best reason to stay away from distant troubles is that interventions in other countries often fail or, if they seem to succeed, soon backfire. Even successful interventions can be Janus-faced. Thus, America’s participation in the Korean War helped contain Communist expansion, but it also encouraged a major debacle — more than 10 years of fighting in Indochina. On the other hand, an ostrich posture may be impossible to sustain and can generate costs. Having closed their eyes and ears to nuclear developments in Israel, India and Pakistan, the Big Five placed few obstacles on their paths to becoming nuclear weapon states — an example that Pyongyang hopes to emulate.

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3 Return to Fortress America
Should the US withdraw its forces from South Korea and Japan and let China and North Korea’s other neighbors wrestle with the Kim Jong Un regime? Besides saving money, a US withdrawal would diminish US tensions with China and North Korea. If Pyongyang’s missiles threaten the US and its allies, beef up anti-missile defenses. Somewhat like George F. Kennan in 1950, Doug Bandow at the Cato Institute has argued that the US should begin to act as a “normal nation” in Northeast Asia: “Washington should end its defense guarantees and withdraw its troops from South Korea and Japan ... while the US retains an interest in a stable Northeast Asia, even more so do the surrounding nations. The best American ‘leadership’ would be to turn responsibility for the peninsula over to neighboring states. Let them deal with the ‘North Korea problem.’”

Against this proposal is the argument that the US remains the indispensable force in preventing an anarchic war of all against all. Given the challenges and opportunities posed by a rising China, it is nearly unthinkable that the US could or should withdraw from Pacific and Asian affairs.

4 Bomb North Korea Before It’s Too Late
Staying clear of civilian targets, the US could try to take out North Korea’s missile and nuclear facilities. Given that the Kim Jong Un regime seeks to survive, it would probably not choose the “Samson option” and bring down the roof. Even if Pyongyang fires back at Seoul, the damage would be less today or tomorrow than if a large-scale war erupts in five or 10 years’ time. Despite best efforts to conduct “surgical strikes,” however, collateral damage would probably be extensive. North Korea probably possesses many caches of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and secret facilities. Preventive strikes would thus probably miss some relevant targets. If the strikes did “succeed,” North Korean scientists would retain the know-how and motivation to rebuild their WMD programs. The regime might act more like a rogue if it lacked a credible deterrent.

“Pre-emption” applies only to a blow against an imminent attack. A “preventive” war aims to destroy a future capacity to attack. While this might appeal to purists, it has few backers in South Korea or Japan, the likely targets of North Korean revenge attacks. Why risk a highly likely retaliatory blow when there is no imminent danger?

5 Hack and Frack
How to transform North Korea? Harvard researcher Jieun Baek suggests that the US and South Korea should “hack and frack” the erstwhile Hermit Kingdom: First, strengthen covert operations to hack into North Korea’s information channels and support internal dissidents. Second, increase funding for NGOs in the US and South Korea to transmit outside media into North Korea and provide business skills to North Koreans. Third, bolster training for North Korean defectors in journalism, IT and social media. The more informed its citizens, the less Pyongyang would be able to eliminate “bad seeds” by relegating alleged criminals and their relatives to prison camps. Subversion might not destroy the regime, but it could surely weaken it. Broadcasts by Radio
Free Asia, balloon-lifted propaganda leaflets and smuggled electronic devices help to inform some North Koreans about their own country and the world. Anti-regime propaganda probably shocks others might be displeased to learn of their leaders’ indulgences while their soldiers hungered. The effects of hacking and hacking can be strengthened by intensifying sanctions that target North Korea’s privileged 1 percent and challenge their loyalty to the regime. Deep social changes can also be fostered by the demonstration effects of China and South Korea and by cultural and scientific exchanges, as well as by tourism. Still, subversion could inflict only modest damage to the core of a pervasively totalitarian dictatorship. Regime change in North Korea would be far more difficult than in Eastern Europe or North Africa. Yes, non-violent revolutions overthrew dictators in those regions, but these convulsions took place in societies with much weaker controls than in North Korea and with far greater access to communication technology and external contacts than those available to most North Koreans.

How to help North Koreans overcome their estrangement from crimes against humanity, because the North Korean government failed to do so. It said that the United Nations must ensure that those most responsible for the crimes against humanity committed in North Korea are held accountable. Options to achieve this end include a Security Council referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court or the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal by the United Nations. United Nations recommendations for internal change were well conceived but would never be implemented by the North Korean leadership. Indeed, international condemnation of North Korea could bolster Pyongyang’s dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons and devotion to its gulag archipelago. North Korea’s leaders would never choose to destroy their privileged way of life. A paradox loomed: the commission’s recommendations, if implemented, would either require regime change or bring it about. Knowing this, the Pyongyang leadership would fight them and become more determined to build up its nuclear weapons so as to resist external dictation. Doing the “right thing” — condemning the Kim family dictatorship — could make things worse.

**6 Pressure by the United Nations**
The UN Security Council condemned North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests and mandated sanctions to punish and prevent these practices. The UN Human Rights Council’s Commission of Inquiry in 2014 recommended strong measures by the Security Council and General Assembly to stop human rights abuses in North Korea. The commission of inquiry asserted that “the international community, through the United Nations, bears the responsibility to protect the population of the DPRK from crimes against humanity using first and foremost appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means.”

The commission asserted that the international community had a responsibility to protect North Koreans from crimes against humanity, because the North Korean government failed to do so. It said that the United Nations must ensure that those most responsible for the crimes against humanity committed in North Korea are held accountable. Options to achieve this end include a Security Council referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court or the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal by the United Nations. United Nations recommendations for internal change were well conceived but would never be implemented by the North Korean leadership. Indeed, international condemnation of North Korea could bolster Pyongyang’s dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons and devotion to its gulag archipelago. North Korea’s leaders would never choose to destroy their privileged way of life. A paradox loomed: the commission’s recommendations, if implemented, would either require regime change or bring it about. Knowing this, the Pyongyang leadership would fight them and become more determined to build up its nuclear weapons so as to resist external dictation. Doing the “right thing” — condemning the Kim family dictatorship — could make things worse.

**7 Tolerate the regime but seek to transform North Korea so it can join the world**
How to help North Koreans overcome their estrangement from the rest of humanity? Could outsiders encourage a transition to a modernizing and reform-oriented North Korea? Could North Korea adopt and adapt China’s example to maintain top-down political control but open doors to market economics and cultural exchanges? China managed the transition from Maoism to Leninist capitalism thanks in large part to the genius and other personal qualities of Deng Xiaoping. In the second decade of the 21st century, however, no such leader has appeared in Pyongyang. The closest candidate was Kim Jong Un’s uncle, Jang Song Thaek, but he was executed in 2013. Both China and Russia have reasons to prefer a reformed and modernizing North Korea to a unified Korea. Commercial interests in China and Russia can penetrate North Korea more readily if it remains separate from the South. Authoritarians in Beijing and Moscow face fewer challenges if freedom reigns only in South Korea.

Both the feasibility and the difficulty of implementing a Chinese model can be seen in the Rajin-Khasan project. It aims to refurbish the Rajin port on North Korea’s northeast coast and renovate a railroad connecting Rajin to the nearby Russian town of Khasan. A double-track railway between Rajin and Khasan reopened in September 2013 after years of renovation. The state-run Russian Railways had a 70 percent stake in the joint venture, with North Korea holding the rest. South Korean companies were expected to buy part of the Russian stake. President Park Geun Hee supported Russian participation in the project as a way to build a “Silk Road Express” linking South Korea to Europe via North Korea, Russia and China.

A modernized rail link from Siberia into North Korea opened in 2013 and conducted a test run in April 2014, carrying coal from Siberia to Rajin. By late 2014, the Rajin port, now renamed “Rason,” had three wharfs — one leased to Russia, one leased to China and one for North Korea. Some five million tons of Russian coal were unloaded at Rason in 2014. The Russian pier has been upgraded, and huge new cranes stretch into the sky. The Russians also renovated some 50km of railway leading to the harbor, while the Chinese completed a highway to their own territory.

North Korea could also exploit its hub location to manipulate South Korea as well as China and Russia. For South Korea to become a full member (not just an observer) in the Organization for Cooperation between Railways (OSJD), it needs the unanimous support of all existing members. As of August 2015, North Korea continued to block South Korea’s full membership, impeding if not derailing President Park’s hope for a new Silk Road from Korea through Siberia to Europe.

Russian and Chinese authorities expressed frustration at the slow pace at which North Korea met its various commitments. Perhaps seeking to speed up their transactions, Russia and China were collaborating on construction of the Zarubino port on Russia’s Pacific coast just 18km from China and 80km northeast of Rason. It was expected to handle as much as 60 million tons of cargo each year — many times more than Rason.

After a visit to Rason in 2014, the Vienna-based economist Rüdiger Frank wrote:

Even though Rason has been a Special Economic Zone since 1991, and despite travel restrictions for locals, it has remained a part of North Korea that looks, smells, and feels like the original. The roads are a bit bumpy, there are villages with the typical low white buildings, kitchen gardens, surrounding walls, unpaved roads and long wooden chimneys seen everywhere in the DPRK’s northern provinces. Ox carts pass by, children with red scarfs march to school, the city is covered with slogans glorifying the “Great Sun of the 21st century, comrade Kim Jong Un” or the Party’s Military First (songun) policy. Public announcements on wallpapers … remind people that September and October are “hygienic months” (wisaeng wolgan) and encourage them to pay extra attention to cleanliness. A gigantic mosaic mural with the faces of the two deceased leaders sits on a hill, right next to the international telecommunication center that was once built by Luxley of Thai.

Two bronze statues of the leaders are under construction. Many windows in the apartment blocks in Rason are equipped with solar panels, and the balconies are full of red Kimjongilia.

Comparing Rason and the Industrial Zone near Kaesong, Frank said that Kaesong was a completely artificial world separate from the real
North Korea. At Kaesong, “South Korean factories, guaranteed free of communist propaganda, stand in a previously sparsely inhabited North Korean plain. About 50,000 selected North Korean women are brought in by buses every morning, work their shifts, and then return to their living quarters outside the zone. The area is off limits for ordinary North Koreans and for Western tourists alike. Call it a zoo or Disneyland.”

The tragedy of Rason, according to Frank, was that the zone opened up in ways that foreigners might like but, as of 2014, this effort brought in little foreign investment. “Here, North Korea is what it could be without major reforms or effort: more open, more human, more approachable, more honest, and obviously much more interested in business co-operation with the outside world.”

Foreigners were allowed to mingle, unsupervised, with locals. The local bank published currency exchange rates close to free market rates. Regulations of all kinds were reduced. But potential investors were still put off by the country’s volatile military-political environment, its unpredictable legal climate, and the human rights situation. Frank wrote in late 2014: “I leave the Rason SEZ with excitement about what is possible in this isolated country, and full of hope that the reality as I see it in this enclave will sooner or later be extended to the rest of North Korea. After all, Kim Jong Un has announced the opening of nineteen new SEZs. But in order for Rason to become a model, it has to overcome the ideological concerns of skeptical cadres. The only way to achieve this is economic success.”

Economic growth in a unified Korea would probably slow for several years but, as new synergies emerged, accelerate. A larger pie would soon mitigate the economic costs of unification. Fears of war or lawlessness would no longer deter foreign investors surveying opportunities in the former North Korea. Business elites in the South would profit more from economic integration than workers, many of whom might suffer from wage competition with North Korea. Given that a growing percentage of South Koreans are elderly, they would benefit from the larger and more youthful base of support generated by workers in North Korea.

In a unified country, Koreans in the North would trade less with China and more with their natural trading partners in the South. Economic growth would gain as the educated and disciplined workers in the North synergized with the capital and modern technology of the South. It is unknown how quickly northerners would absorb capital and modern technology. Most northerners might be slow to accept new ways at first, but then do so with alacrity. Most northerners were taught to obey—not to innovate. Still, the engineers at Yongbyon as well as North Korean musicians and dancers, foreign traders, and entrepreneurs abroad, displayed great ingenuity and industry in the early 21st century. So did the middle-aged women who opened market stalls to sell whatever they could in Pyongyang and other northern cities. Their food intake and living standards could advance dramatically if local resources were shifted from military to civilian applications.

But regime collapse could also lead to war. Former Communist elites could seize as their personal property resources and enterprises that had belonged to the state. There could be a struggle between “haves” who benefited from top-down, dynastic rule and the mass of have-
nots hopeful for a better life. Remaining hardliners might train their weapons on rivals and insurgent have-nots or shoot across the border at the South. They could even threaten a nuclear doomsday for all.

The ensuing turmoil could be sharpened — or modulated — by outside intervention. Chinese forces as well as US/South Korean units could face many challenges: establish a provisional government; prevent pillaging and civil or cross-border war; locate and secure all weapons, conventional and WMD; shut down proliferation networks and seal borders and ports to ensure against leakage; prevent egress by persons of concern; provide humanitarian relief — food, shelter, medical care and decontamination in case of leaks from weapons production or storage facilities.

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might acquiesce to a unified Korea led from Seoul — or strive to prevent egress by persons of concern; provide humanitarian relief — food, shelter, medical care and decontamination in case of leaks from weapons production or storage facilities.

The interveners could fight to dominate the erstwhile North or strive to harmonize their actions. As of 2015, Chinese officials were reluctant even to discuss collaborative action to mitigate this danger. Given that rebuilding North Korea would be a huge and costly task, Beijing might acquiesce to a unified Korea led from Seoul — provided that US troops stayed in the South or, better still, left the Korean Peninsula entirely.

Thus, regime failure could lead to one of the best — or one of the worst — possible futures.

Engage and Negotiate

Which approach has the best prospects? Strategic patience yielded no fruit. To detach from Northeast Asia was not feasible for the US. A preventive strike would entail unacceptable risks. Subversion, sanctions and external pressures pushed the Pyongyang regime to hunker down. Indeed, with the North Korean leadership neurotic about reform and any form of unification, Washington’s default posture had to be deterrence and containment. This orientation could prevent a war, but would not stop North Korea from improving its weapons and oppressing its people. Deterrence might be necessary but would not suffice to elicit positive changes in Pyongyang’s behavior. The only viable route to peace in Northeast Asia is to engage and negotiate. The best hope to improve security and the human condition in Northeast Asia probably lay in policies that encourage more openness in North Korea.

The devolution of the Cold War offered lessons for dealing with North Korea. The US and its allies maintained the hard power needed to contain and deter the USSR, but they also used engagement and negotiation to cope with and ultimately defeat Soviet imperialism. Simmetry and sufficiency made arms controls between the US and the USSR/Russia thinkable. Their arsenals were similar in size and quality. These features have been absent in US relations with North Korea. Washington has wanted to improve and keep most of its nuclear arsenal while denying nuclear weapons to North Korea. However, Pyongyang regards its incipient nuclear-missile capability as its bargaining ace and insurance against foreign attack.

Assuming that North Korea insists on keeping its existing nuclear arsenal, the US and its partners could try to negotiate a freeze on the North Korean stock of nuclear weapons and fissile materials. As with Iran, however, any agreement would require a wide-ranging inspection and verification scheme.

If negotiations fail to reach an agreement, the US and its partners need to restrict North Korea’s ability to raise the quantity and quality of WMD. The partners would need to block Pyongyang’s capacity to obtain, as well as proliferate, nuclear and missile materials and technology.

Engagement could mean expanded cultural and other exchanges. The US missed an opportunity to arrange a North Korean visit to reciprocate that of the New York Philharmonic to Pyongyang in 2008. Starting in 2011-2012, however, the Knowledge Partnership Program at the University of British Columbia brought several groups of North Korean professors to its campus for six-month periods to study business. Meanwhile, the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology has permitted 500 sons of the North Korean elite to study with American and other foreign professors. The university’s official aim is to equip these young men with the skills needed to modernize North Korea and engage with the international community. The university was founded by Dr. James Chin-Kyung Kim, a Korean-American entrepreneur invited by the North Korean leadership to build a university similar to one he opened in northern China. Heavily subsidized by American and South Korean Christian charities, the university is far more open than most other North Korean institutions. As of 2015, however, the only female on the staff worked in the computer room to prevent students from accessing e-mail, social media, or international news. North Korea strives to prevent ideological contamination, but this campaign is unlikely to win in the long run.

FOR AND AGAINST ENGAGEMENT AND NEGOTIATION

Each of the three Kims called at times for serious discussions with the US to secure peace and stability in the region. Skeptics in Washington have warned that Pyongyang uses negotiations merely to extract concessions, divide its adversaries and buy time to continue its WMD programs without outside interference. Even if Pyongyang negotiates in good faith, any engagement with North Korea will serve to legitimize and perpetuate a regime that deserves to perish.

If each side maintains a rigid hard line, serious negotiation might never begin. The Kim Jong Un regime sometimes calls for talks without preconditions, while the Obama White House insists that Pyongyang virtually surrender before negotiations could begin. Washington says it will resume talks only if North Korea demonstrates it would live up to its obligations, includ-
ing compliance with UN Security Council resolutions, and ultimately, denuclearization. Each party is concerned with “face” and the appearance of reliability. Each believes that the other has acted in bad faith in times past. Each wants to defend its “principles.” The key issue, however, is whether some kind of accommodation can create values for each party.

To meet Pyongyang’s quest for honor, security and profit, a grand bargain has to be negotiated and implemented. The US and its partners need to provide credible security assurances as well as diplomatic recognition, economic and technical assistance to North Korea. The quid pro quo would be a freeze on North Korea’s development of WMD. The outlines of such a package deal were initiated in 1994, 2005, and 2012, but were aborted by myopic forces on each side.

Stanford University nuclear expert Siegfried Hecker has suggested the US and its partners pursue the “three nos” — no more bombs, no better bombs (no more nuclear testing), and no export of nuclear technology and materials — in return for one yes: American willingness to seriously address North Korea’s fundamental insecurity. A high-level North Korean government official told Hecker in November 2010 that the October 2000 Joint Communiqué, which brought Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Pyongyang, would be a good place to start.

What sort of deal could be arranged? At least seven points need to be addressed:

- Security assurances for North Korea to compensate for limits on its nuclear deterrent;
- A peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice;
- Adjustment of the Northern Limit Line to reduce conflict and share resources of the West Sea;
- Establishment of diplomatic relations between Washington and Pyongyang and between Pyongyang and Seoul;
- The gradual end to UN sanctions against North Korea in tandem with Pyongyang’s acceptance of a freeze of its nuclear and missile programs;
- Cultural, educational, family and information exchanges;
- Agricultural and technological assistance to North Korea.

Any grand bargain would need to serve the interests not only of the US and North Korea but also of South Korea, Japan, China and Russia. Mutual gain could be accomplished by a few compromises and moves to “enlarge the pie.” All the actors in Northeast Asia need to think of their shared concerns as interacting within a circle that can shrink or expand. How could they grow the circle of what is negotiable? More and more issues, conflicts and situations could be negotiated. Where did the circle end? How large could the circle become? If the parties focused on their deepest interests, the circle of what is negotiable could expand exponentially. For this to happen, however, all parties would need to perceive and work for outcomes beneficial to all stakeholders.

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