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Negotiating with North Koreans

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Negotiating with North Korea: Lessons Learned (and Relearned?)

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Lesson # 1: Be Humble

North Korea exists to make every American administration look foolish. We have a hard time understanding how this insignificant 3rd world backwater, the last outpost of the Cold War, can consistently thwart the will of the world's only superpower.

A large reason is that we simply do not understand North Korea very well. As Ambassador Donald Gregg has said, "North Korea is the longest running intelligence failure in U.S. history." We simply do not have a very good understanding of how decisions are made, who makes them and why.

A recent example of U.S. miscalculation: press reports stating that Bush administration officials were surprised at how North Korea has reacted to our confronting them over evidence of an enriched uranium program. Two earlier examples: (1) predictions that Kim Jong-il would not long survive in power after his father's death and (2) North Korea's August 1998 launch of a three-stage ballistic missile.

Lesson #2: You Can Do Business with North Korea

It is possible to do business with North Korea. The KEDO experience bears that out. KEDO has signed over 50 protocols, agreements and MOUs with North Korea. Some have involved very sensitive matters such as Privileges & Immunities for ROK nationals in North Korea, and direct transportation and communication links. By and large, North Korea has honored them.

Lesson #3: But It Is Never Easy

You can reach agreements with North Korea, but it is never easy. The North Koreans are very experienced, very patient negotiators. They like to keep all their options open for as long as possible.

North Korea is also more comfortable than the U.S. and other countries in conducting negotiations at a high level of tension, even at times artificially creating a crisis to generate tension. Examples: the March 1993 threat to withdraw from the NPT and repeated threats at KEDO to walk out and restart their nuclear weapons program unless KEDO capitulated. And of course, the last few months have been a textbook example of North Korea gradually raising regional and international tensions.

Lesson #4: Distrust and Verify

It goes without saying that we should never trust North Korea to keep its side of a bargain. To state the obvious: All agreements with North Korea need to be verified continuously, rigorously and comprehensively to ensure strict compliance.

Let me add one cautionary tale, because it has not received adequate attention. In 1992 the North Koreans signed a safeguards agreement with the IAEA and provided an initial declaration of facilities and activities. Under the 1994 Agreed Framework, the North agreed to allow ad hoc and routine inspections on all facilities and activities listed in the initial declaration. From day one, North Korea did not abide by this commitment. In particular, it did not allow IAEA inspectors access to the Isotope Production Laboratory at Yongbyon, where we know North Korea had separated plutonium. For years, neither the Clinton Administration nor the IAEA raised the alarm about this important violation. So as a final point: it is not enough to distrust North Korea. It is not enough to verify North Korean behavior. You must also call North Korea to account when it violates its commitments.

Lesson #5: The Importance of U.S. Leadership

It should be obvious to everyone by now that the U.S. is the key player on the Korean peninsula, if only because the North Koreans are insisting that we talk directly with them. In addition, in certain situations, Washington's talking with North Korea can provide useful domestic political cover for South Korea and Japan to engage with North Korea.

Lesson #6: Mid-Level Bureaucrats Need Not Apply

It is also clear that North Korea is far too "precocious" for the United States to simply ignore. The range of issues it raises – nuclear proliferation, ballistic missiles, CW and BW, the conventional force balance on the Korean peninsula, human rights, and our alliance relationships with South Korea and Japan – present unique challenges for Washington. Bureaucratically, it requires a mixture of area specialization and arms control expertise.

We have seen that this challenge requires senior level officials with broad authority to handle this portfolio. It was only when former Secretary of Defense William Perry was named the North Korea Policy Coordinator that the Clinton was able to overcome what one critic labeled its policy of "strategic incoherence" towards the North. More recently, it has been Secretary of State Powell's direct intervention on the North Korea issue that has improved chances for a diplomatic solution to the current crisis.

Lesson #7: Ideology vs. Pragmatism

President Bush was correct in his judgment that the North Korean regime is part of an “axis of evil” and that Kim Jong-il eminently deserves to be loathed for his despicable treatment of his people. North Korea is a very sad place and we would all be much better off if the regime did not exist.

Unfortunately, that is unlikely to happen tomorrow or anytime soon. Disliking North Korea is an attitude, not a policy. As William Perry stated in his report, “We need to treat North Korea as it is, not as we would like it to be.” That means we need to put aside an ideological approach, determine our most pressing national security concerns, and then try to capture them by engaging with North Korea.

Lesson #8: Unilateralism vs. Multilateralism

Although the United States must always be able to willing to act unilaterally to defend its interests, it almost always can strengthen its position if it acts in concert with close allies, like South Korea and Japan. To paraphrase Winston Churchill: “The only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them.” Expressed somewhat differently, multilateral diplomacy can be a “force multiplier.”

There are examples of effective multilateral efforts towards North Korea. KEDO is an obvious one. The Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group, or TCOG, is another.

A new president will be inaugurated in South Korea on February 25. He has no personal experience in foreign affairs and his foreign policy advisors will largely share this inexperience. It is essential for the United States to take extra steps to ensure that we consult and coordinate closely with the Blue House as we go forward with North Korea.

Lesson #9: U.S. Credibility

Perhaps the single most important lesson from the events of the past few months is this: If you do not have a policy towards North Korea, North Korea will determine your policy for you. For the past four months, the United States has been reacting to events after the fact. North Korea has set the agenda and the pace of the diplomacy.

This type of behavior inflates North Korea’s importance and diminishes the United States. It hurts American credibility in Northeast Asia and around the world.

The Bush needs to play a more active role diplomatically. This will mean working closely with our friends and allies in the region – as frustrating as this often can be. It means engaging directly with North Korea – and Lord knows this will not be easy or lead to a speedy resolution. And it means determining not only what we want from North Korea, but also determining what we are prepared to give them in return – something no American administration has ever done.

As difficult and complicated as these steps will be, they are far better than the other policy alternatives.

