

Unpacking a US Decision to Engage North Korea: What it Entails and What it Could Achieve

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A Third Way?

In a report published last January in *38 North*, “Unpacking a US Decision to Use Force Against North Korea: Issues, Options, and Consequences,” Robert Jervis assesses the efficacy of using force against North Korea. Jervis cautions against assuming that superior US military and economic capabilities guarantee success in denuclearizing the North. He also underscores the uncertainties attendant to even the limited use of force: actors beyond the United States-North Korea binary will influence outcomes, and how North Korea itself will respond is unpredictable. It would be a mistake, Jervis observes, to “attribute the failure only to a lack of American willingness to be tougher.”

Although Jervis’ analysis draws on lessons probably familiar to any US military commander, the White House—notwithstanding the possibility of a Trump-Kim summit meeting in the near future—has surely not abandoned the idea of using the “military option” to force North Korea to cease work on its nuclear arsenal. Frustrations are running high: when international pressure on Pyongyang intensified, the regime sped up its efforts to develop a credible nuclear deterrent. Moreover, when US rhetoric toward the North heated up, Pyongyang thumbed its nose at the US, responding with increasingly credible threatening rhetoric of its own. For example, Kim Jong Un declared in his 2018 New Year’s speech that the US “mainland is within the range of our nuclear strike and the nuclear button is on my office desk all the time; the United States needs to be clearly aware that this is not merely a threat but a reality.”¹

But in that speech, Kim also declared:

As a responsible, peace-loving nuclear power, our country will neither have recourse to nuclear weapons unless hostile forces of aggression violate its sovereignty and interests nor threaten any other country or region by means of nuclear weapons. However, it will resolutely respond to acts of wrecking peace and security on the Korean Peninsula.

The speech, while devoting considerable space to breaking the inter-Korean deadlock, can also be read as creating room for diplomacy between the US and North Korea. Donald Trump’s recent and unexpected acceptance of an invitation to meet Kim Jong Un, and China’s support of this

summit taking place, may open the door to a “third way” beyond sanctions and use of force, namely reenergized engagement.

But what is “engagement,” what would an engagement strategy look like, and what could it hope to achieve? Engagement is more than a set of diplomatic actions or bargaining activities. It is a strategic process of persistently seeking common ground between antagonists to reduce tensions and divert two sides in a dispute from violent choices, all in the shared pursuit of mutual security.² To be sure, after several unproductive efforts at negotiating denuclearization over the years, the idea that any new diplomatic strategy for North Korea might meet with success faces both skepticism and resistance from the policy establishment in Washington. One of us recalls an Obama administration official who worked on North Korea policy lamenting that Pyongyang is like a “Taco Bell”—you might go looking for something new but you’ll always get the same thing—which is to say, not much. Indeed, from the perspective of policymakers who have pursued negotiations and other leading observers, North Korea has been largely immune to diplomatic inducements, including freezes, reassurances of security from US intervention and the prospect of normalization of relations.

Wendy Sherman and Evans Revere have concluded that North Korea wants “nuclear weapons more than any inducement.”³ Understanding what North Korea really wants is essential because hope that progress toward denuclearization can be achieved through an engagement strategy rests on the idea that both sides share a common goal of improving mutual security. In this essay, we argue that there is space for negotiation around the idea of mutual security, defusing tensions and creating conditions for eventual denuclearization throughout the Korean Peninsula.

We come at this discussion of engagement and what could be achieved by engaging North Korea today from two quite different perspectives on world affairs. One of us has spent decades defining a human-interest approach to international affairs centered on incorporating global-citizen values in policymaking such as peace (minimization of violence and conflict resolution), mutual respect and social justice. The other sees engagement as creating opportunities for trust building and problem solving through diplomacy between states amid the international insecurity endemic to international relations. The differences in how we see the potential for the behavior of states importantly do not preclude a shared definition of engagement and its importance in a diplomatic strategy for North Korea.

What is Engagement?

Engagement is different from a maximalist approach to diplomacy that seeks transformative grand bargains. As Mel Gurtov writes in his recently published book, engagement is “built around a strategy of *preventive peace-making*” through seeking steps the parties can take, symbolic as well as substantive, to start a trust-building process that will also test each side’s intentions.⁴ Progress is almost certain to accrue only gradually and rarely steadily, requiring a commitment to building and maintaining multiple channels of communication, official and nonofficial. Empathy is also required, even when dealing with morally unpalatable regimes. It is a politically difficult process, highly vulnerable both to attacks from one’s own politicians that it is not producing results and to charges of appeasement—to “making nice with nasty or

hostile regimes,” as Chester Crocker has observed.⁵ Engagement-minded leaders have the burden of proving to their publics that consistent, multifaceted contact with “rogue” or “aggressive” regimes is in the national interest. When engaging a regime that does not distinguish between the public and private spheres, the engagement-minded leader will be challenged to persuade the adversary that critics do not speak for her administration.⁶ For all these reasons, political will and perseverance are also key elements of an engagement strategy.⁷

The US has limited practice with engagement approaches when dealing with adversarial states. Rather than routinely engaging adversaries diplomatically with the expectation that communication can help avert conflict though improving conditions for less hostile, more normal relations over time, Washington has generally preferred to tie talks with adversaries to preconditions, under the assumption that this limits the capacity of its adversaries to extract concessions and exploit the talks for their own purposes.⁸ An engagement policy, however, has to proceed in the confidence that, even in seemingly intractable cases, greater communication, reciprocal incentives and improved transparency are themselves assets in a longer process aimed at delivering improved security.

Historical examples of engagement that yielded improved ties between longtime rivals include the rapprochement between Norway and Sweden in 1905 after nearly a century of estrangement, the end to the militarized rivalry between Indonesia and Malaysia in the mid-1960s and the rapprochement between Argentina and Brazil in the late 1980s.⁹ More recently with regard to US foreign policy, a shift to engagement strategies by the US with both Cuba and Iran moved relations away from hostility. In these cases, the keys to successful agreements were not only perseverance and multilevel contact but also empathy and mutual respect. With regard to both the Iran and Cuba cases, bilateral relations have a long way to go before they become normal ties, which will require a process of steady engagement.

At the time of writing, President Trump may well overturn the deals with both those countries. Especially with Iran, ending the nuclear agreement will undoubtedly complicate what may be achievable through engaging North Korea. Trump has signaled his preparedness by the May 12 deadline to withdraw from the agreement and ramp up pressure on North Korea if it refuses to denuclearize. The two moves would have interactive consequences: Pyongyang would likely see a decision by Washington to cast aside the Iran nuclear deal as further evidence that the US cannot be trusted to keep its commitments. It could read it as a signal that, should nuclear talks with Trump fail, a US attack on North Korea’s missile and nuclear sites could be in the offing.

The issue of credibility also applies to the legacy of US relations with Libya. The Trump administration will have to overcome the damage to the credibility of US assurances of the US-led intervention in Libya in 2011, less than a decade after the Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi agreed to give up his nuclear program and rejoin the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). In 2011, a North Korean official quoted in the country’s official news agency called the bargain made by the West with Libya “a grave lesson” and “an invasion tactic to disarm the country.”¹⁰

How to Engage North Korea—Challenges and Opportunities

Questions of credibility raised by US backtracking from commitments made to Cuba and Iran are only one of the many challenges Washington will confront if it chooses engagement with North Korea. Pursuing engagement with a hostile and autocratic regime, overcoming domestic political opposition to engagement, and improving on the problematic history of US-DPRK diplomacy are other formidable challenges.

There are clear difficulties in interacting with a repressive regime with a record of using fear and violence to control its citizens. There are governments that are so heinous, untrustworthy and oblivious to dialogue—Bashar al-Assad’s Syria is one—that an engagement strategy would be inappropriate and unworkable. Engagement confers a certain legitimacy on the hostile state and implies that its interests have validity. In addition, although nondemocratic states may be able to make bold policy shifts due to their concentration of power, the control such states generally exert over their societies and media makes it possible for these regimes to make promises to external audiences that may be transmitted very differently internally.¹¹ That same control often also means that any hostile act, such as imposition of sanctions, can be used to fuel nationalistic support of the regime. And, of course, the challenge for a US leader who chooses engagement with North Korea is proving the credibility of a commitment to engagement to the adversary, while contending with domestic pressures against engagement with a regime that has an appalling human rights record—one that recently sent an American college student it had imprisoned home in a coma just before he died and that still imprisons three Americans.

The history of diplomatic disappointments between the US and North Korea also shades expectations for any diplomatic interaction today. As Sherman and Revere suggest, there are questions on the US side about whether its assumptions about what North Korea wants to gain from engaging the US are correct. Historically, the premise underlying US diplomacy with the North has been that if the US could provide adequate reassurances to Pyongyang it had a chance to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear program. As former Secretary of Defense William Perry stated after visiting North Korea in 1999 as a special emissary of President Clinton: “We do not think of ourselves as a threat to North Korea, but I fully believe that they consider us a threat to them and, therefore, they see this missile [program] as a means of deterrence.”¹² North Korea’s leaders, including Kim Jong Un in his New Year’s address, have repeatedly indicated that deterrence of a US attack is indeed a central security issue for the DPRK. The director of the South Korean National Security Office, Chung Eui-yong, reported that during his meeting in Pyongyang in early March, Kim Jong Un had indicated that he would have no reason to possess nuclear weapons if the military threat to North Korea from the US were “resolved.”¹³

From the perspective of many experts in Washington, the US has delivered just such security assurances in agreements that were violated by North Korea in ways that suggested they had been used as tactics by Pyongyang to sustain its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs. The 1994 Agreed Framework collapsed when US intelligence showed that the North was pursuing a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program. Likewise, in 2005, the joint statement of the Six Parties, which laid the basis for energy assistance to North Korea, security assurances and ultimately diplomatic relations, all on the principle of “action for action,” foundered and ultimately broke down completely with North Korean missile and nuclear testing.

Yet, US actions also raised questions about its own commitment to the agreements it had made. During the Agreed Framework years, North Korean violations took place amid erratic deliveries of promised heavy fuel oil and significant delays in the construction of civilian light water reactors (originally scheduled for completion by 2003, they were at least five years behind schedule). US security assurances nearly gained traction during the Clinton presidency, when a proposed deal in 2000 would have exchanged North Korea's cessation of its nuclear and missile program for US economic aid. But the proposal was upended by the election of George W. Bush. The Bush administration's decision to back away from promises not to use force and introduce tough new financial sanctions preceded the end of efforts to implement the terms of the 2005 joint statement.

However, several new developments that are in some respects unique in the history of US-DPRK relations open the door to potentially more productive diplomacy. First, is the role played by South Korea. The inter-Korean dialogue initiated by South Korean President Moon Jae-in, while redolent of Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy," has given South Korea an unprecedented intermediary role in moving the US and North Korea toward engagement. Significantly, Washington appears to have accepted this approach, at least for now. Close coordination with Seoul by Washington could enable the broadening of areas for discussion to include peace on the peninsula as well as denuclearization. A US approach in tune with South Korean interests also insulates against the possibility of two separate and uncoordinated dialogues taking place—an inter-Korean dialogue and a US-DPRK dialogue—that creates discord in the alliance that could be exploited by North Korea.¹⁴

Second, China's changed approach to North Korea under the leadership of Xi Jinping has also facilitated conditions for engagement. Beijing's concern is that North Korea is on balance a greater liability to China's international interests and security than it is a benefit. Beijing has demonstrated its new position by putting the kind of economic pressure on North Korea it previously eschewed. Although China has objected to the most recent set of unilateral sanctions imposed by the US, it has stepped up enforcement of international sanctions. (Reports indicate that by December 2017, the third month of the most recent UN trade sanctions, China's imports of North Korean iron ore, coal and lead stood at zero and Beijing was severely cracking down on smuggling across the Sino-DPRK border.¹⁵) China's willingness to let its relations with North Korea deteriorate to pressure Pyongyang back to the negotiating table has been critical to getting an unprecedentedly isolated North Korea to talk to the US.

Third, the Trump administration must also be credited for creating conditions favorable for engagement.¹⁶ Kim Jong Un has indicated that he wants recognition as a "serious partner for dialogue" and security assurances, namely "eliminating the US military threat to North Korea and a guarantee of its security" and normalization of relations with the United States. Trump came to office saying he was open to talking with North Korea and his decision to do so, after having adopted a "no talks" line, would seem to satisfy Kim's desire to be treated as a "serious partner for dialogue." In addition, while signalling a willingness to use force directed against North Korea's nuclear assets, some top Trump administration officials—former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis—had expressed the view that US policy does not seek regime change or Korean reunification.

What Would an Engagement Strategy Look Like?

These conditions offer an opening for the US to inaugurate a phased engagement process with North Korea to reduce tensions and build toward an agreement on denuclearization. Although completely and verifiably denuclearizing North Korea is the longstanding US strategic goal, from the standpoint of engagement, it is not the ideal starting point. In any diplomatic process, the possibility of reaching agreement is greatly reduced if the most difficult issue—denuclearizing North Korea—is put first on the agenda. Past efforts that have done so have failed, and there is no reason to think trying again will work out better. As a former special adviser for nonproliferation and arms control, Robert Einhorn, argues,¹⁷ an incremental approach that accepts interim goals is the best route to successful talks with North Korea; proceeding otherwise amounts to zombie diplomacy—that is, career diplomat Joseph DeThomas defines it “pursuing long-dead, unachievable objectives at the expense of important interim goals.”¹⁸

To inaugurate a phased engagement process to reduce tensions and build toward an agreement on denuclearization, it will be necessary for both sides to demonstrate a commitment to improving bilateral relations through both symbolic and substantive actions. On the symbolic level, for instance, in advance of or immediately following a Trump-Kim summit, Washington might dispatch a prominent individual to Pyongyang as a special envoy to establish the will to move forward. The US and North Korea might again pledge, as they did in 2000, “no hostile intent” toward one another. Both governments might open the door to wider Track II and people-to-people contacts. The US citizens still detained by North Korea would be released.

A second, substantive tier of engagement might include a “freeze-for-freeze” such as China has proposed. Suspension of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs would be extended in return for a US-ROK suspension of military exercises for a certain period. (One experienced observer has proposed a more ambitious step: a “hard” freeze by North Korea on further production of nuclear weapons materials in exchange for various US concessions, including ending military exercises.¹⁹) North Korea might agree verbally to shelve the idea of being officially recognized as a nuclear-weapon state.

Talks might also start to structure an international verification plan for the North’s nuclear weapons. Perhaps Kim Jong Un will not give up these weapons but will agree to warehouse them, while affirming the goal of denuclearization articulated in the 1994 and 2005 agreements. Both countries might agree to end hostile propaganda, and some sanctions on North Korea might be lifted as access to the country by nongovernmental aid organizations widens.

Provided neither side commits a serious violation of these understandings, Washington and Pyongyang would have momentum to move to a third phase of deeper engagement. This stage might include implementation of the verification regime, further easing of US and UN sanctions, increased economic and humanitarian aid to North Korea, and a peace treaty guaranteed by China and Russia as well as the US and South Korea.

Conclusion

Trump's agreement to sit down with Kim Jong Un provides an extraordinary opportunity for a new engagement approach to North Korea. In testing Kim's seriousness, and demonstrating his own, Trump will have to be willing to entertain proposals for less than immediate outcomes. If his summit with North Korea collapses amid disappointed expectations, this could pave the way for reenergizing military options, turning an opportunity into catastrophe. It could also seriously disrupt US-ROK relations. To be sure, there is no guarantee that engagement will produce mutual gains that set the Korean Peninsula on a positive new course. It may be that these talks also fail and we assess that the best we can do is try to keep a channel of communication open as the US maintains regional deterrence capabilities. On the other hand, with North Korea, the US has never truly attempted the kind of peacebuilding that an engagement strategy requires.

Endnotes

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