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Negotiating with North Korea: Who's In Charge?

by Doug Bandow, Cato Institute

President George W. Bush famously said that he “loathed” North Korea’s Kim Jong-il. However, with an impending leadership change in Pyongyang, diplomatic solutions are likely to become even rarer, despite former President Bill Clinton’s recent visit.

Since the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea was established in 1948, only two men have held supreme power: Kim Il-sung, who died in 1994, and his son, Kim Jong-il. The 67-year-old Kim suffered a stroke last August and disappeared from public view for months. When he reappeared he looked gaunt and sickly. Kim is thought to be afflicted with diabetes and heart disease and has been rumored to have cancer.

Since the 1994 Agreed Framework, the North has engaged in an on-and-off negotiation with the United States and its neighbors over ending its nuclear program. Despite the common assumption that the North was willing to deal, Pyongyang had obvious reasons to reject even a seemingly generous offer. Nuclear weapons offer the North security assurance, international status, and extortion opportunities. Still, hope of a solution rose in the aftermath of the October 2007 denuclearization agreement. Alas, North Korea subsequently denounced the arrangement, expelled international inspectors, and even renounced the 1953 Armistice. Earlier this year Pyongyang conducted a nuclear test and several missile tests.

None of this means that North Korea could not come back to the table. The Clinton visit demonstrates that surprises are ever possible. However, today there is increasing doubt that the DPRK will abandon its nuclear program and existing nuclear materials. Moreover, North Korea’s current internal instability will make reaching a deal even more difficult.

The military is central to Kim’s rule, and its influence has been rising. Kim may have decided he must placate an insti-

tution capable of ratifying or blocking any leadership transition; the military may have become more demanding in the wake of his incapacity. In his prime Kim may have had sufficient authority to sacrifice the military’s most powerful weapon as part of a political deal. A seriously ill Kim may not. A transitional collective leadership likely would not. Even more problematic is the leadership transition. North Korea has evolved into the modern equivalent of the Ottoman Empire. “Great Leader” Kim Il-sung was married twice and had many other relationships. Kim Jong-il apparently has had four wives or long-term mistresses. He has several children from different spouses as well as a number of illegitimate children.

Earlier this year Kim apparently designated 26-year-old Kim Jong-un, his youngest son, as his heir. However, unless Kim Jong-il survives and rules for at least several years, the younger Kim is unlikely to have an easy time claiming his political inheritance in a culture that typically reveres age—and in which potential rivals are many.

The regime number two appears to be brother-in-law Jang Song-taek, who might not be satisfied playing a secondary role in the event of Kim Jong-il’s death. Many other senior officials have been waiting for years and even decades to take charge. Moreover, numerous Kim family members are available to front for competing factions, including Kim’s half-brother, two other sons, and current wife/mistress. How this international soap opera will turn out is anyone’s guess.

It is hard to imagine the situation getting worse in the DPRK. However, overt factionalism, a brutal power struggle, and political instability could add an incendiary element to peninsula affairs. At the very least, an insecure leader, weak collective rule, and/or de facto military rule all would make North Korean concessions on the nuclear issue even less likely.

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is dedicated to promoting peaceful resolutions to the nuclear crises in North Korea and Iran. It aims to provide policy makers with analysis on the latest developments in both nations and options for formulating coherent U.S. responses. In highlighting the importance of achieving diplomatic solutions, the goal is to avoid armed conflict and its attendant consequences.

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“It is time to ask what the U.S. and North Korea’s neighbors in East Asia plan to do if Pyongyang is not willing to abandon its nuclear ambitions”

—TED GALEN CARPENTER,
writing in the *Christian Science Monitor*

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*Persuading Beijing to Get
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The United States should continue diplomatic efforts, both bilateral and multilateral. Moreover, Washington should intensify its efforts to engage China in a concerted campaign to pressure Pyongyang and/or seek to

effect regime change. At the same time, however, the United States and North Korea’s neighbors should prepare for the possibility of an even more unsettled and dangerous future. ■

Engaging China to Solve the North Korea Problem

North Korea is a “dangerous and unique mix,” said Cato senior fellow Doug Bandow, at a Policy Forum “Engaging China to Solve the North Korea Problem.” It tops the list of most misgoverned countries, behaves increasingly provocatively, and suffers from leadership instability. Given its power in the region and influence over Pyongyang, China is the most crucial player in efforts to constrain the rogue behavior of its small communist neighbor. The United States needs to convince Beijing that Washington will not take geopolitical advantage if China applies increased pressure on the North. That means offering to share in the cost of caring for refugees in the event of a North Korean collapse and promising not to use a unified Korea as a military base against China.

Ted Galen Carpenter, Cato’s vice president for defense and foreign policy studies, said recent actions by the North Korean government have further undermined the dubious assumption that the country will eventually agree to give up its pursuit of nuclear weapons. And, while China has considerable leverage, the Beijing government is reluctant to use it, fearing that such action might destabilize North Korea. Carpenter argued that the United States must convince Beijing that it has exhausted every diplomatic avenue, and that means serious bilateral talks with North Korea, including the offer of a “package deal” of concessions to Pyongyang in exchange for nuclear cessation.

Scott Snyder, director of the Center for U.S.-Korea Policy at the Asia Foundation, raised four key issues currently facing the United States. What is China’s principal approach to North Korea? What is the impact of the recent North Korean missile test? How will this test change China’s approach? And how might the United States affect China’s stance towards North Korea? Larry Nicksch, a specialist in Asian affairs at the U.S. Congressional Research Service, said that China’s approach to North Korea is remarkably consistent: China has never placed much priority in a nuclear-free North Korea, but instead seeks containment. The United States must push China to enforce existing sanctions, but Washington must also be willing to set out conditions under which sanctions would be lifted. But any help from China will require sophisticated diplomacy, Nicksch said.

The discussion closed with comments from Bandow, who stressed that there are no good answers. The available options include having the United States, South Korea, and Japan indicate a willingness to help China deal with refugees, should the North Korean state collapse; the United States and Japan offering to police a collapsed North Korea; and a gradual end to the U.S. military presence in South Korea. Bandow was clear that the United States must negotiate with and seek to convince China to be more proactive, and not simply issue diktats to Beijing, if there is any hope of making China a more helpful partner in resolving the problem of North Korea. ■