

How to Convince Kim Jong Un to Denuclearize North Korea

Written by Dan G. Cox and Bruce Stanley

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DAN G. COX AND BRUCE STANLEY, MAY 16 2017

Kim Jong Un is in a great bargaining position. This may seem counterintuitive as the United States and South Korea moves toward conflict with North Korea but a lot of the increase in tension stems from the inability to penetrate the narrative space in North Korea and as Admiral Harris put it, bring Kim Jong Un “to his senses, not to his knees.” Still, the major players, China, South Korea, and the United States all have strategic reasons for keeping the North Korean regime in power, albeit without a nuclear weapons capability. China is the most frightened of regime change and the reunification of Korea as they fear democracy moving close to their border fomenting liberalism in their state. The United States is recalcitrant to overthrow Kim because they know that any re-stabilization after regime change effort would likely cost trillions. Similarly, South Koreans believe in one Korea and an eventual reunification but given the poverty and backwardness endemic in the North Korean economy, the South Korean administration is loath to reunify under current conditions.

It may seem logical for Kim Jong Un to be shaken by Chinese troop movements near the Yalu river, the introduction of the THAAD anti-missile system, and an increasing US naval presence. Further, Kim Jong Un may feel slighted by his Chinese benefactors who have ceased aviation fuel deliveries to the North Korean military and recently threatened an oil embargo which would further destabilize an already fragile economy. Because North Korea is the most cloistered state in the world preventing outside media from entering the country, we have no idea what internal pressures Kim is facing and how they play into his perception that his back is against the wall. We do know that he feels somewhat threatened ordering the execution of over 300 “enemies of the state” in his short time in power.

Given all of the rational reasons that make Kim Jong Un feel cornered, the situation is really not as bad as he is perceiving it. First, China has no interest in a regime change in North Korea. China may want a different leader than Kim Jong Un given their rocky relationship but if Un starts to tow the line and nest more neatly into Chinese strategy, he will find China to be a willing partner. Current Chinese strategy places an emphasis on an undemocratic North Korean buffer zone to protect the Chinese population in Southern China from democratic contamination. As the Chinese economy grows, Chinese interests are beginning to spread outside of mainland China. Despite efforts to control information, interaction with the world is offering Chinese citizens access to alternative views and ideologies. Recent Chinese experience with Hong Kong has taught the Chinese Communist Party that close exposure and interaction with free peoples erodes their ability to exercise control. The Xi Jinping administration is reticent to allow another major exposure to democracy to occur and further erode the Central Communist Party’s rule.

South Korea views North Korea as part of a greater Korean nation-state and they hope for reunification in the future. However, in 2013 the cost of Korean reunification was estimated at 1.15 trillion dollars and this is not a cost that South Korea can bear. Immediately after reunification, it is likely as well that South Korea would have to deal with a number of internally displaced persons from North Korea streaming south looking for better employment opportunities. The disruption economically, politically, and demographically is too much for South Korea to bear.

The United States has recent experience with regime change and it has been costly in blood, treasure, and international political capital. The recent Iraqi war cost the United States over two trillion dollars and the ongoing occupation in Afghanistan has cost and estimated two to three trillion dollars if one factors in continuing medical

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costs for veterans. Almost seven thousand US military personnel have died in the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions. Tens of thousands of other military personnel have been wounded as well. The United States has also expended a lot of political capital forging coalitions, invading other countries, operating UAVs in numerous countries. The United States cannot undertake another occupation and nation-building affair in North Korea. Further, North Korea has spent the last seventy years propagandizing to its people how evil Americans are. The difficulties faced by Americans occupying North Korea are great.

For all of these reasons, Kim Jong Un is actually in a far better position to negotiate than he thinks. He is misperceiving animosity toward his nuclear weapons program as animosity toward him. There is no doubt that patience is wearing thin regarding Kim Jong Un's nuclear program but that does not mean that his regime will be exposed to risk if he gives up his nuclear capability. Un's deterrence does not come from his nuclear program which is incomplete and fraught with failures and no proven ability to place a nuclear weapon in a missile. Deterrence comes from his artillery which hangs over the 25 million people of Seoul like a sword of Damocles. He also gains deterrence from economic weakness; no one wants to rebuild North Korea in its current pathetic state. Unfortunately, these reasons are not fully understood by Un and breaking the spatial and cultural barriers North Korea has erected to get this message to Un is a daunting task. Because North Korea has isolated itself from the world, the narrative space is almost impenetrable. Major leaders need understand this and to entice Un out of his shell to convince him to give up his nuclear program and negotiate *his continued reign as the leader of North Korea*.

In a brilliant article, Jacob Heilbrunn argues that now is the time for US President Donald Trump to begin bilateral talks with Kim Jong Un. Heilbrunn deftly notes that "The lesson of the Cold War is that détente offers a road to undermining totalitarian regimes. Confrontation tends to shore up shaky regimes." Confrontation or brinksmanship can also create a feeling of paranoia or hopelessness in the leader you are confronting leading to a military confrontation you neither want nor are prepared for. Negotiation is a better tactic and South Korea's recently elected president understands this. Moon Jae-in has said he wants to re-open bilateral negotiation with Un and he is even willing to go to Pyongyang. President Jae-in even spoke of reopening a joint industrial district in the city of Kaesong, North Korea had allowed skilled South Korean workers to help train North Korean workers and develop light industry. The Kaesong industrial venture is economically and culturally beneficial to both states.

However, in order to enlighten Un on his position and to convince him that denuclearization has more upside than downside, more than reopening the Kaesong industrial park must be on the table. The United States must meet with Un and assure him that he and his administration are not the target of regime change. The United States, China, and Japan must also assure North Korea that nuclear weapons are not needed for deterrence. In the 1970s, the United States denuclearized South Korea but only after committing to her protection. The United States should work toward convincing China that they can play the same role in North Korea. China has been an ally to North Korea and the Chinese administration could help bolster a non-nuclear North Korea. It may be harder to convince Un that his artillery carries the real deterrence and it is not politically expedient for either China or the United States to argue this publicly as the South Korean populace may see this as a callous strategic misuse of the people living in Seoul. The United States could also lift sanctions if North Korea denuclearized and perhaps even build some trading inroads that benefits the development of North Korea. China could take an active role building their own cross-border industrial zone expanding development. None of this can happen if the major players around North Korea continue to ratchet up the pressure. The time for negotiation is now. Let us just hope a cloistered and paranoid Kim Jong Un is willing to come out of his shell.

About the author:

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