

Is Obama about to go wobbly on North Korea?

by Mike Green

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After campaigning on the untenable promise that he would meet with leaders like Kim Jong Il without preconditions, President Obama has actually approached North Korea with a firmness that sometimes eluded the Bush administration in its last year. The Obama administration has strengthened trilateral security coordination with Japan and South Korea; implemented tough UN Security Council sanctions against the North after its nuclear tests; and rebuffed Chinese pressure for emergency Six-Party Talks in the wake of Pyongyang's unprovoked attacks on South Korea. Given the North's escalating provocations and nuclear cheating and Beijing's dangerous complacency, this is the only strategy that has a prospect of deterring further belligerency and reversing the incentives the North sees in proliferation on the peninsula and beyond.

This past week, however, senior Japanese and South Korean officials are reporting that the administration has begun signaling to them that the United States is ready to "shift back to dialogue" with the North. The Blue House in Seoul now feels under pressure to accelerate its own resumption of North-South dialogue so that US-DPRK talks can get underway (since the administration has rightly stated that it would not get ahead of its ally South Korea's own diplomacy toward Pyongyang). In Tokyo there is an eerie sense of *déjà vu* at yet another potential swing in the pendulum of US North Korea policy. Both Tokyo and Seoul want some dialogue with the North and the administration deserves credit for how closely it has coordinated strategy with both capitals. But since the Hu Jintao visit to Washington, the dynamic seems to have shifted from US-Japan-ROK trilateral pressure on China to rein in the North to a new pattern of US-China pressure on Seoul to pick up the pace of engagement (that, at least, is how one senior ROK official put it to me). Given our inconsistent history on North Korea to date, one can understand why our allies would be a bit nervous about where all this might go.

Dialogue is not bad, as long as the expectations are realistic. What are the administration's expectations? Three possibilities come to mind: one of them would be delusional, one potentially problematic, and one quite reasonable.

The delusional expectation would be that Pyongyang is ready to deal on nuclear weapons. While some administration allies on the progressive left make this argument, I do not think anybody in the senior levels of the Obama

administration believes it ... and for good reason. Pyongyang has announced it will be a full nuclear weapons state by 2012 and is unapologetically violating every agreement it has ever made in order to get there.

The second expectation could be that dialogue is necessary in order to de-escalate from last year's pattern of confrontation and crisis. This logic is correct, but only up to a point. My Georgetown University and CSIS colleague Victor Cha issued a report last May that tracked 60 years of inverse correlation between US-DPRK dialogue and North Korean provocations (i.e., when we are talking, the North Koreans tend not to blow things up). This report has apparently resonated in the administration and animated the discussions about re-engaging the North. However, as Victor points out, the data does not necessarily demonstrate a causal link between dialogue and lack of North Korea provocations. In fact, on most occasions the North Koreans walked out of talks unilaterally and *then* conducted nuclear tests or military provocations. In other words, Pyongyang has retained control over when dialogue will be an obstacle to its own desired proliferation or military actions. Moreover, talks have rarely prevented the North from continuing with proliferation activities clandestinely, as we have learned with increasing clarity after the fact. Finally, there is a danger that our own obsession with reducing tensions through dialogue could actually create more tensions in the long-run, since Pyongyang will always be in a position to manufacture new crises when they want to up the *ante*. It would be an enormous mistake to assume yet again that the danger of war means we need dialogue more than Pyongyang does. When that happens, we start paying for the dialogue by easing tensions in ways that only help the North advance its primary goal of nuclear weaponization and increased pressure on us.

The third possible reason for talking would be as a complement to the current strategy of alliance-centered deterrence, interdiction, and pressure on the North's overseas financial and technology arteries (including in China); and preparation for possible change in the North post-Kim Jong Il. In this context, reliable communication channels with the North could help to clarify strategic signals (in terms of both sticks and potential carrots), increase understanding of North Korean tactical intentions in a crisis, and probe over time the possibility for more substantial negotiations. However, expectations of negotiated outcomes would remain low, as would our willingness to invest in the process by reducing pressure on the North. If this is the administration's perspective, our defensive measures with Japan and South Korea and our efforts at interdiction and sanctions implementation would be redoubled in light of Pyongyang's determined push to mount nuclear weapons on ballistic missiles, regardless of whether we are talking to them in Beijing or some place.

My guess is that the administration debate about engaging North Korea is somewhere between reasons two and three. Hopefully, they are closer to reason three and the architects of the strategy will proceed knowing exactly what they think they can achieve from dialogue and what it would be worth. Otherwise, it is will far too easy to slip into a process with the North where we become more afraid of ending talks than they are of our deterrent power. Let's talk, but let's not go there again.

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