North Korea's Latest Challenge: What is to be done?

By Evans J.R. Revere

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Karl Marx, who wasn't right about much, managed to get one thing right when he declared that things occur twice in history, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Both tragedy and farce have characterized our troubled relationship with the DPRK over the years. Today, there are signs that a new tragedy in this relationship may be in offing, this time of Pyongyang's making.

In 1999, the DPRK left the Four Party Talks involving the two Koreas, China, and the United States, preferring instead to focus on bilateral talks with the United States. Pyongyang also slowed the pace and the productivity of U.S.-DPRK talks that had grown out of Presidential Special Envoy William Perry's historic effort to improve relations between the United States and North Korea.

Both these moves severely reduced the chance that the United States and North Korea would be able to fulfill the potential of the U.S.-DPRK dialogue before the Clinton administration came to a close. The North Koreans were told as much by U.S. officials at the time.

After a long hiatus in senior-level bilateral talks, the North Koreans re-engaged with the United States in October 2000 in a dramatic and determined fashion. A senior officer of the Korean People's Army and first vice chairman of the DPRK's ruling National Defense Commission, Marshal Cho Myong Rok, came to Washington and met with President Clinton and his National Security team. In those talks, Cho and his U.S. interlocutors made remarkable progress, reaching understandings on anti-terrorism cooperation and other issues and laying out the basis for a fundamental redefinition of the U.S.-North Korea relationship.

This visit was followed less than two weeks later by Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright's historic meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang, where the two conducted far-reaching discussion on the nuclear and missile issues that were at the heart of U.S.' concerns vis-à-vis North Korea.

Following that meeting, however, an inconclusive and disappointing set of U.S.-DPRK negotiations on missiles in Kuala Lumpur in November 2000 quickly sapped the momentum of the dialogue process. North Korean representatives insisted that only a visit by President Clinton to Pyongyang could resolve the missile issue. That idea was met with deep skepticism by many U.S. officials, who were unwilling to risk such a visit lest Clinton return from Pyongyang empty handed.

As a result, the intense U.S.-DPRK engagement of late-2000 ground to a halt. As many on the U.S. side had feared almost a year earlier, the Clinton administration ran out of time to

pursue further diplomacy with Pyongyang and the press of other priorities, including the Middle East, compelled the president's attention elsewhere.

Seen in retrospect, North Korea's decision to re-engage so late in the Clinton administration was a major miscalculation. It meant that a process which had generated considerable hope and optimism would fall short. It also required the Clinton administration to pass the baton on this issue to the next administration – a step that had tragic (or, some would say, farcical) results.

The story of U.S.-DPRK relations under the eight years of the Bush administration is a familiar one and need not be repeated here. It was a period marked by mutual hostility and mutual suspicion, broken agreements, lost opportunity, empty threats, miscalculation, and misperception.

What little trust that had been built between Pyongyang and Washington quickly dissipated with the discovery that North Korea was secretly developing an alternative path to nuclear weapons development through uranium enrichment. Pyongyang's perceived perfidy opened the way for Bush administration figures to torpedo key agreements reached during the Clinton administration. One prime target was the 1994 Agreed Framework, which had successfully capped and frozen the North's known nuclear weapons program, but which was deeply despised by some critics.

On top of this, a belief by some senior Bush administration officials that the United States should not negotiate with "evil" virtually guaranteed that any serious effort to use diplomacy to resolve differences with Pyongyang would be dead on arrival.

The predictable result of this policy approach was to open the door to North Korea's resumption of its nuclear weapons development and missile programs (it is often forgotten that, among the agreements abandoned by the Bush administration, was the one that had prevented the North from launching medium- and long-range ballistic missiles for seven years between 1999 and 2006).

The eventual, tragic outcome of this approach was the October 2006 nuclear test which, as a North Korean official told me last year, "changed everything" in terms of how the DPRK viewed itself and its relations with the United States, and made it almost certain that the North would never agree to give up its nuclear weapons. Seen in retrospect, it is one of the ironies of history that a group of neo-conservative true believers who helped shape and promote the early Bush administration's North Korea policy effectively served as the handmaidens of Kim Jong-il's nuclear weapons program.

The waning years of the Bush presidency saw the administration adopt a radically different approach to dealing with Pyongyang, both out of necessity and a search for legacy. Aware that its policy on North Korea had produced only one substantial outcome – the creation of a new nuclear weapons state in Asia – the administration reversed course. And having little to show for its tenure other than years of unilateralist, confrontational, and divisive foreign policy, the administration tried a radically different approach on North Korea to score at least one "win."

The Bush administration's 180-degree shift on North Korea left heads spinning and allies (particularly Japan) dismayed and feeling betrayed. The Bush administration adopted a secretive, compartmentalized approach to diplomacy and policy formulation that kept allies, partners, and elements of the U.S. bureaucracy in the dark about the U.S. game plan. Ironically, this approach drew on the playbook developed in the first four years of the administration, when Secretary of State Powell and other moderates found themselves undermined and outflanked thanks to the work of what one former Bush administration official called a "secret cabal" operating a parallel foreign policy.

The opaque machinations of the late-Bush administration's North Korea policy even puzzled one senior North Korean diplomat, who used a meeting with visiting Americans to convey his own incredulity about the quiet assurances he was receiving from the United States. During this period, an administration that had once declined even to meet with the "evil" DPRK began to make major concessions to it. It opted to put off until the future the serious task of getting to the bottom of North Korea's proliferation of nuclear technology to Syria and its uranium enrichment efforts. Such was the extent of the administration's policy turnabout that it left even moderates and pro-engagement advocates worried. In the end, this approach produced a fragile freeze on the North's nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, the (readily reversible) destruction of the reactor's cooling tower, and a shaky verbal understanding on verification that began to unravel quickly as the administration drew to a close.

This was the situation that the new U.S. president inherited in January 2009. As the new administration marked its first 100 days, President Obama, who has a natural instinct for smart diplomacy and for putting the pressure on the other side to make the mistake of rejecting outreach, deserves credit for managing the North Korea issue well.

Pyongyang, on the other hand, has played things terribly. Miscalculation, misperception, and internal politics appear to be driving the DPRK's policy in a dangerous and self-destructive direction.

The Obama administration's rhetoric on North Korea has been generally measured, careful, and calm, with none of the empty threats and posturing that used to characterize U.S. statements on North Korea.

The Obama administration reached out, both publicly and privately, to Pyongyang and clearly conveyed the United States' intent to use both multilateral and bilateral diplomacy to address the nuclear and other core issues. President Obama appointed Ambassador Stephen W. Bosworth as his Special Representative to deal with North Korea – a step that signaled the U.S. intention to deal with Pyongyang at a high level and in a pragmatic way. The fact that Ambassador Bosworth is one of the few American officials ever to have negotiated successfully with North Korea and to have concluded agreements that actually worked should have been seen by the North Koreans as evidence of U.S. willingness to deal positively and constructively with them.

During the presidential campaign, throughout the transition, in his inaugural speech, and subsequently, President Obama has signaled an approach and direction to diplomacy with

adversaries markedly different from his predecessor. At some political risk, he has reached out to Iran, Cuba, and to Venezuela. Listening to the President's rhetoric and observing his follow-through, there is no doubt in this observer's mind that the Obama administration was prepared to deal with Pyongyang in the same way, and the diplomatic signals reflecting this were all blinking green. Based on this, I and many other Americans conveyed to our North Korean interlocutors our sense that the arrival of the Obama administration presented an historic opportunity to put the U.S.-DPRK relationship on the right track. Regrettably, North Korea seems to have a different agenda for the bilateral relationship. Its actions and response thus far suggest that it is not interested in the diplomacy of reconciliation and cooperation that President Obama seeks to pursue.

The DPRK has responded to the Obama administration with an escalation of its rhetoric, including threats of war. Pyongyang has told visiting Americans that the DPRK should now be acknowledged as a nuclear weapons state and that even normalized relations with the United States will not change its nuclear status. The North Koreans have said to U.S. interlocutors that the only price it might consider acceptable in return for the elimination of its nuclear weapons program would be the dissolution of the U.S.-ROK security alliance, the removal of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula, and the withdrawal of the U.S. "nuclear umbrella" from our Korean and Japanese allies.

A senior Bush administration official was once quoted as saying that, as an empire, America was able to "create its own reality." In making some of its recent demands, North Korea appears to be suffering from the same delusions. As if to confirm its intransigence in even more egregious ways, the DPRK welcomed the inauguration of the Obama administration and the outstretched hand mentioned in President Obama's inaugural address with an announcement of its preparations for a "satellite launch." The DPRK delivered on its threat and conducted a launch, despite clear warnings from the PRC, the United States, and other members of the international community. The DPRK has now walked out of the Six-Party Talks and threatened the ROK with war if Seoul joins the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). Pyongyang has called for the United Nations to apologize for the Security Council President's Statement, and threatened to conduct additional nuclear tests, to launch more missiles, and begin a uranium enrichment program if there is no apology.

The reasons behind Pyongyang's new belligerence remain unclear. There are signs that the DPRK's behavior may have a lot more to do with its complicated internal politics than with its international agenda. But whatever the cause, the DPRK has adopted a disturbingly hard-line approach toward the United States and others and has embarked on a course of escalating rhetoric and intensified hostility.

On the core issue of whether it will ever give up its nuclear weapons, the DPRK's rhetoric suggests it has finally made the "strategic decision" long sought by the United States and others over years of negotiations. Regrettably, that decision appears to be that it will keep its nuclear weapons and seek to have the United States and the international community recognize it as a nuclear weapons state. If that is indeed Pyongyang's goal, it raises an important question about what the purpose of renewed multilateral or bilateral talks would be if they are not aimed at eliminating the DPRK's nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, the DPRK has announced it is resuming operations at the Yongbyon reactor and nuclear weapons facility. It has ousted IAEA inspectors and U.S. technicians from Yongbyon. This follows North Korean statements to a U.S. visitor earlier this year that the DPRK had "weaponized" all of its existing plutonium. Faced with this grim situation, the camp of "optimists" in the United States, particularly those who still believe that the DPRK will ever give up its nuclear weapons at the bargaining table, has seen its ranks depleted.

The North's actions and rhetoric have alienated many U.S.-based Korea hands who had dedicated themselves to the cause of deeper and more comprehensive engagement with Pyongyang. North Korea has always found it easy to anger its enemies. Tragically, it is now perfecting the technique of alienating many of those who aspired to be its friends. Even in China, one can now hear voices saying that North Korea is increasingly seen as being a net liability for China. Yet the PRC remains hamstrung by its aversion to applying too much pressure on the North, lest it induce a collapse.

As suggested earlier, Washington has responded to the DPRK with calm and with a determination not to be provoked. It would seem that the days when bombast and brinksmanship could bring the United States and its allies scurrying to the negotiating table may be over. Washington has also made it clear to Pyongyang that the door to multilateral and bilateral negotiations remains open if the North wishes to walk through it. That is smart; it will serve to underscore that it is Pyongyang, alone among the six parties, which is rejecting dialogue.

At the same time, the United States has intensified bilateral and trilateral consultation and coordination with its Japanese and South Korean allies; reassured them of U.S. commitments to their security; and obtained unanimous approval of a UNSC President's statement that reaffirmed sanctions on the North and declared Pyongyang's missile launch a contravention of UNSC Resolution 1718.

Pyongyang's missile launch has stimulated even stronger interest in missile defense in Japan. Even the South Koreans are beginning to talk about the need to build their own missile defenses. These two developments have caught Beijing's attention, and the PRC cannot be pleased that its North Korean neighbor and "ally" is compelling other countries in the region to take steps that could eventually undermine the effectiveness of China's strategic missile forces.

So where are we now?

The next move is Pyongyang's. If the North's recent rhetoric is any guide (and it should be), we are in for a very difficult period. Military incidents, more missile launches, and another nuclear weapons test cannot be ruled out, especially since Pyongyang has ruled them all in. Whatever happens, the patience and solidarity of the United States and its allies and partners will be tested in the months ahead.

All of this could be avoided if Pyongyang were to choose another path. However, there are worrisome signs that, for domestic political reasons, Pyongyang either cannot or will not do so.

Regrettably, the DPRK has clearly misread the Obama administration, mistaking a sincere offer of a new relationship and a comprehensive dialogue as a sign of weakness. Instead of agreeing to work with a new U.S. president clearly committed to a new approach to international diplomacy, they have sought to test him.

Pyongyang is probably surprised that the Obama administration has not risen to the bait of the North's provocative behavior. North Korea's leader also cannot be pleased that the DPRK's rhetoric and actions have not only failed to divide the United States from its allies, but on the contrary have helped the U.S., South Korea, and Japan work more closely together than they have in eight years. And the unanimous support in the UN Security Council for the recent president's statement probably cannot be sitting well in Pyongyang.

Despite the dark place it finds itself in, there is still time for North Korea to repair the damage. Perhaps the DPRK's leader can begin to extricate his country from the box it is in by questioning the advice he is getting. One question he might ask his subordinates is: Why did you have me pursue policies which have angered the Obama administration, made the DPRK look like a international pariah, united the U.S. and its Asian allies as never before, driven food aid workers and their assistance out of the country, prompted China to support a UNSC statement, and made Cuba, Venezuela, and even Iran look more reasonable in the eyes of the world than the DPRK?

A second question he might ask is: Why did you have me do all of this in order to get a bilateral negotiation with Washington, including on missiles, that I now find out we could have gotten for the asking, as long as we kept the Six-Party Talks in play? Your foolish advice, he might add, has now put us in danger of losing everything. Since both the conciliatory diplomacy of the Obama administration and President Obama's Special Representative seem to be unwelcome in Pyongyang, perhaps the North's leader might consider dispatching a high-level representative to Washington to shake President Obama's outstretched hand. Such a bold step has the potential to yield a better future for North Korea than will slapping that hand away. It will also help us avoid another tragic turn in U.S.-DPRK relations.

About the Author

Evans J.R. Revere is President of Korea Society in New York City. He is a veteran diplomat who previously served as principal deputy assistant secretary and acting assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs where he managed U.S. relations with the Asia-Pacific region.

He also served as charge d'affaires and deputy chief of the mission at the U.S. Embassy in Seoul (2000-2003) and as the deputy chief of the U.S. team conducting negotiations with North Korea (1998-2000).