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Denuclearization Negotiations with North Korea Are Worth Pursuing

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This is an abridged version, edited by Damien Tomkins, of Denny Roy's original article "Parsing Pyongyang's Strategy" published in the International Institute for Strategic Studies publication Survival: Global Politics and Strategy 52, no. 1(2010): 111-136.

Denny Roy, Senior Research Fellow at the East-West Center, explains that "For rapprochement to occur, Pyongyang's ruling elites must come to see their current nuclear weapons program as a security liability rather than a security asset."

North Korean policies frequently seem intended to raise tensions with the United States and other countries in the region. This gives rise to a theory that despite the costs of its economic and diplomatic isolation, Pyongyang actually does not want to permanently improve its relations with all the other major countries of East Asia because the constant state of near-war helps the regime stay in power. Nevertheless, based on what is known about the North Korean leadership, the argument that it is not politically possible for Pyongyang to reach a rapprochement with the United States or South Korea should be rejected. That such a rapprochement has not been realized is not due to the regime's pre-commitment to an endless cold war. Rather, it is because the regime is highly sensitive to the vulnerabilities a rapprochement would entail. Consequently Pyongyang has had stringent conditions to fulfill for an agreement to take hold and bear fruit. These restrictions stem from the leadership's perceptions of what is necessary for regime survival. For rapprochement to occur, Pyongyang's ruling elites must come to see their current nuclear weapons program as a security liability rather than a security asset. They must believe that a post-nuclear relationship with the United States would on balance be an improvement over the nuclear status quo, and for domestic audiences, that they can spin the trading away of the nuclear weapons program as a victory for North Korea.

This is not to say, however, that negotiations must be sustained even at the cost of giving Pyongyang additional undeserved or unreciprocated concessions. The position the Obama and Lee Myung-bak administrations took in late 2009 is defensible: that bilateral meetings (which Washington stressed were not "negotiations") were possible, but that North Korea would get no new concessions until it demonstrated recommitment to its previous promise to denuclearize. The Obama administration has also done well to call attention to a past pattern of interactions that had the effect of rewarding North Korea for raising political tensions. As 2010 begins, observers expect Pyongyang to push hard to get Washington and Seoul to soften their positions, using the threat of more provocative behavior as leverage. Washington and Seoul should avoid letting the tail wag the dog. Having already broken through the thresholds of testing ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons and engaging in self-destructive naval skirmishes with South Korea, Pyongyang has few cards left to play. The United States, South Korea,



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and Japan must demonstrate fortitude and patience in the face of North Korean saber-rattling until the regime sees its way clear to come in from the cold.

Many analysts have called for addressing North Korea’s security concerns. It is true that the regime feels highly insecure, both domestically and internationally. The leadership’s fear of internal opposition is manifest in North Korea’s vast apparatus for managing information, controlling political and social activity, and punishing dissent. Likewise, Pyongyang perceives a highly threatening environment vis-à-vis the United States, South Korea, and Japan. However, a potentially more fruitful and under-used approach would be for the U.S. government to hold its nose and give the Kim regime face. In the past, Pyongyang has noticeably reacted well to gestures of respect and negatively to gestures of disrespect, suggesting to some analysts that the desire for status is a major driver of the government’s behavior. In June 2009, when U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton compared the North Korean government to “small children and unruly teenagers . . . acting out” to get attention, North Korea quickly shot back that Clinton “is by no means intelligent. . . . Sometimes she looks like a primary schoolgirl and sometimes a pensioner going shopping.” In contrast, a visit in August 2009 by Secretary Clinton’s husband, former U.S. President Bill Clinton, made possible the release of captive U.S. journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee.

It may be true that this is an odious regime that does not deserve the fellowship of a country that stands for democracy and human rights, but this would hardly be unprecedented. Washington has maintained partnerships with many odious regimes, a consequence of the nature of international politics. Giving North Korean leaders some of the respect they seem to crave would be a small price to pay if it helps prepare the ground for progress toward a rapprochement and eventual denuclearization.

There is understandable skepticism that Pyongyang could accept the terms now set by Washington and Seoul for ending the mini-cold war. In September 2005, North Korea agreed in principle to give up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for economic and political benefits. Giving up its nuclear weapons program now for no additional concessions beyond a return to the 2005 agreement seems tantamount to trading a very expensive investment for nothing. Such a view, however, would be mistakenly narrow.

North Korea’s nuclear weapons program has succeeded in fast-tracking the package of economic and political benefits that Pyongyang would enjoy under the envisaged “grand bargain.” Political support in the United States, South Korea, and Japan for realizing normalized relations with a denuclearized North Korea is greater as a result of Pyongyang crossing the nuclear threshold because it removes the previous doubt about whether the North Koreans could produce a working nuclear weapon and whether, therefore, they had something substantial with which to bargain. In this sense the nuclear program, even posthumously, will have increased North Korea’s national security in ways that justify the program’s costs.