

U.S. Policies Toward North Korea Under The Obama Government

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Abstract

U.S.-North Korean relations have been troubled for decades. The Obama administration deals with that legacy. The Obama campaign and his first year in office conveyed diverse implications for U.S.-North Korean issues. North Korea's hard line posture and global economic and geopolitical pressures on the Obama leadership team made it hard to focus on innovative policy changes. Two captive American journalists in North Korea made it especially difficult. How that was resolved using former President Bill Clinton to help President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrange their release bolstered the prospects for change in U.S. policy. That was reinforced by the improvement in inter-Korean relations that followed inter-Korean meetings at former President Kim Dae-jung's funeral. The prospects for a peaceful negotiations process were underscored by President Obama's being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Obama administration's options regarding North Korea have received significant attention by some American scholars and benefited from avoiding negative scenarios. It is recommended in this analysis that the Obama administration pursue a positive policy approach designed to foster U.S.-DPRK scholarly negotiations, creative use of existing American research centers, and creation of a new U.S. research organization that would focus on improving U.S. policy toward Korean peace processes and reunification.

Keywords: brinkmanship, soft power, hard power, smart power, change, nuclear agenda, missiles, trade, Obama-Lee summit, diplomacy, strategy, six-party talks, bilateral talks, Nobel Peace Prize, geopolitical scenarios, peace process, unification, US-UK

The United States' relations with North Korea have been openly adversarial since the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's creation in 1948. Korea's evolution into a divided nation caused the U.S.-USSR to assume roles on the peninsula that were significant in extending the Cold War. Inter-Korean tensions, obviously including the Korean War and its post-armistice legacy, have been the focus of numerous scholarly assessments. The U.S.-Republic of Korea security alliance and geopolitical bonds have focused on dangers emanating from DPRK policies. Those inter-Korean issues have been of great concern to all U.S. administrations since the 1950s. This analysis will focus on how the Obama administration has shaped U.S. policy toward North Korea during its early months in office and the prospects for the Obama administration's—and its successors'—future approaches to U.S. policy toward North Korea.

Candidate Obama and North Korea

First, it is useful to summarize the ways that North Korea perceived Senator Barack Obama's candidacy for the U.S. presidency, how Senator Obama appeared to North Koreans when compared to his Democratic and Republican rivals, and what Senator Obama's campaign potential for North Korea policy appeared to be. Those North Korean perceptions drew upon North Korea's self-centered domestic political, economic, and strategic dynamics which collectively make the DPRK one of the world's most unusual, highly authoritarian countries.¹ Those North Korean perceptions of the American candidates also drew heavily upon the DPRK's views of various previous U.S. political leaders and their attitudes toward the DPRK's nuclear agenda in the post-Cold War years. This involved the evolution of the George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations' approaches to U.S. policy toward North Korea's nuclear potential and intentions.² The post-9/11 geopolitical environment for the George W. Bush administration's policies toward all states deemed to be dangerous to U.S. interests initially caused the DPRK to be lumped into the "Axis of Evil," but during his second term the President adopted a more flexible approach to North Korea, influenced heavily by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Assistant Secretary Christopher Hill.³ For North Korea, the United States' 2008 presidential election process would yield a successor government which might pursue an approach similar to Bush's second term policies, but on the other hand, could revert to a very hawkish

approach, or could develop new policies that would be even more flexible than Bush's second term policies. Given the unusual qualities of the North Korean regime noted above, Pyongyang could also hope to induce a new U.S. administration to respond positively to North Korean goals in ways that would fundamentally benefit the DPRK by persuading American leaders to accept the peculiar logic behind North Korea's ideology. Although the chances of that occurring were extremely remote, the notion that North Koreans could hope for such a shift in U.S. policy underscores the possible spectrum of geopolitical choices the U.S. elections could represent for North Korea.

One could make a hypothetical case that North Koreans who paid attention to the presidential primaries in 2007-2008 might have favored a contest between a libertarian non-interventionist like Ron Paul and a very liberal anti-war advocate like Dennis Kucinich. Election of either Paul or Kucinich as president would likely have led the United States to disengage from various strategic commitments—including removing U.S. armed forces from South Korea. While the prospects for either candidate are intriguing in and of itself as well for North Korea, it certainly was unlikely. Whatever remote possibility would have been utterly destroyed had the DPRK endorsed either candidate. For that matter, any overt North Korean support for an American Presidential aspirant would severely damage his or her prospects for success. Arguably the only candidate in whom North Koreans might have been somewhat seriously and credibly interested was New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson. The notion of "somewhat" is significant, though, because North Korea had often been uneasy about his influence on North Korean issues and had perceived him as possessing assertive tendencies.

As it became clearer to the entire international community during 2008 that the next U.S. president would either be Republican Senator John McCain or one of two Democratic Senators—Hillary Clinton or Barack Obama—North Korea had to cope with the potential consequences for the DPRK of each. When compared to McCain's record of geopolitical hawkishness and Hillary Clinton's toned down version of her husband's humanitarian geopolitical interventionism, Obama's approach to U.S. foreign and defense policy was more open to the "change" metaphor he used as a core message in his campaign.⁴ Given that metaphor, it is plausible that North Korean specialists in U.S. policy may well have been hoping for a Democratic administration of change-oriented President Obama and a North Korea-interested Vice

President Richardson. Any such hopes initially fell by the wayside with the selection of the Obama-Biden team.

During his presidential campaign, Senator Obama did not make Korean issues a major theme as that it was unlikely to garner much interest or support. Nonetheless, just as Obama did on other foreign policy issues, his comments on Korean issues drew considerable attention in South Korea.⁵ Seoul's interest in a potential President Obama was logical and predictable from the ROK's perspective. However, continuing ROK-U.S. relations did not help to generate North Korean hopes regarding what an Obama administration might do. Although North Korea's KCNA website did not even acknowledge Obama's victory the day after he won,⁶ a few days later North Korean officials at the United Nations met with advisors to President-elect Obama in New York.⁷

President Obama and North Korea

When the Obama administration entered office in January 2009, it clearly had a broad range of national and international issues with which to deal. When, why, and how the Obama administration would deal with North Korea was one of many important topics certain to be addressed. Such options were of serious interest to Americans involved in Korean policy issues and to Koreans in both the ROK and the DPRK. Because of North Korea's volatile and reckless proclivities, there was considerable concern about what the DPRK might do and might not do vis-à-vis the Obama administration.

Possible North Korean hopes regarding trade options with the United States rose when Obama selected Richardson as Secretary of Commerce but presumably fell when Richardson withdrew and was replaced by Chinese-American Governor Gary Locke of Washington State. That early bureaucratic shift by the fledgling Obama administration may have sent mixed signals to North Korea and its PRC neighbor. Nonetheless, there was reason for North Korean leaders to hope that it was the very "change"-oriented decisions made in the United States during the election which led to the New York Philharmonic Orchestra's visit to Pyongyang in February 2008. These concerts, widely perceived as "musical diplomacy" clearly constituted a form of cultural breakthrough which could contribute to a "change" paradigm for the Obama administration's policies toward the DPRK. In short, in the very early phase of the Obama administration and in the wake of its campaign

emphasis on “change” from Bush’s policies, there were plausible reasons for North Koreans to hope for greater U.S. emphasis upon “soft power” use of American economic and strategic stature. Such North Korean reasoning was severely shaken by how the economic recession of 2008-2009 put severe pressures on U.S. foreign policy. In the early months of the Obama administration, despite its once optimistic outlook on foreign affairs,⁸ it reacted adversely under domestic and international economic pressures. Those circumstances and the lengthy domestic focus on health care legislation amidst the economic recession caused the Obama administration to evolve early in its time in office toward a more cautious and balanced approach regarding the “change” metaphor’s significance for U.S. foreign and defense policies.⁹

During Obama’s first weeks in office, while his administration was obviously adjusting to a broad spectrum of domestic and international contexts, there was an effort by North Korea to garner positive American attention to issues constituting U.S.-DPRK relations. A week before Obama’s inauguration, the North Korean Foreign Ministry issued a statement urging the incoming U.S. administration to readjust its approach toward North Korea’s nuclear weapons agenda. Pyongyang even appeared to call attention to how the DPRK, in the weeks prior to the Bush-Obama transition, had “refrained from its usual tirades against the United States.”¹⁰ That effort may have had some success because, after that statement had drawn considerable international attention, Hillary Clinton—during her Senate confirmation hearings to become Secretary of State—was rather upbeat. She suggested the Obama administration would be more open to a bilateral dialogue with North Korea than the Bush administration had been. She said “Smart power requires reaching out to both friends and adversaries, to bolster old alliances and to forge new ones.”¹¹ In the very early days of the Obama administration there were both upbeat and pessimistic media assessments of Obama-DPRK prospects.¹² There also were some significant analytical efforts to advise Obama about how his administration should cope with problems caused by North Korea.¹³ Indeed the early months of the Obama administration tested its abilities to deal with the DPRK’s policies and intentions.

In the second month of Obama’s presidency (February 2009), Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched a major visit to important East Asian states—Japan, South Korea, and China. Before she departed, Secretary Clinton outlined the Obama administration’s approach to

negotiating with North Korea on nuclear issues via the Six-Party Talks which had begun during the Bush administration and—if progress could be made—“to normalize bilateral relations and replace the peninsula’s long-standing armistice agreement with a permanent peace treaty.”¹⁴ Despite that very positive approach, North Korea’s use of another missile test to draw attention to the DPRK’s geopolitical position caused concerns prior to Secretary Clinton’s trip.¹⁵ That possibility became a major issue during Clinton’s visit to Tokyo, playing to Japan’s concerns about such missiles, and causing Clinton to speak bluntly to North Korea about the risks of pursuing that agenda.¹⁶ Those risks were intensified shortly after Secretary Clinton’s trip by additional North Korean brinkmanship about possible missile launches.¹⁷ While in Seoul, Secretary Clinton expressed U.S. concerns about the prospects for political succession in North Korea following Kim Jong-il.¹⁸ During the final stage of her East Asian trip, Secretary Clinton had to deal from Beijing with how effective U.S. “soft power” could be in addressing serious problems with countries such as North Korea during the global economic crisis. That was underscored by the importance of PRC-U.S. economic and how Chinese officials perceived U.S. policy toward North Korea.¹⁹

In the weeks which followed Clinton’s trip, North Korea pursued its brinkmanship on both missile and diplomatic fronts.²⁰ One issue which drew attention in the United States was the seizure by the DPRK on March 17th of two Asian-American journalists—Laura Ling and Euna Lee—for “illegally intruding” into North Korea after crossing the border from China. What drew special attention from many Americans, beyond the event itself, was that the two journalists worked for a media outlet (Current TV) led by former Vice President Al Gore.²¹ Their seizure, followed by Pyongyang’s decision to put them on trial for “hostile acts” against North Korea, led to escalating tensions during the months which followed. Also drawing media attention during that period of Pyongyang’s hostile brinkmanship was Obama’s appointment of an academic North Korea specialist—Stephen W. Bosworth—as the State Department’s senior North Korea expert, replacing Bush’s Christopher Hill, in a part-time position. This allowed Bosworth to remain as Dean of Tufts University’s Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. While a plausible arrangement, it caused concern among some Korean specialists in the United States that the Obama administration attached less

importance to North Korean issues than other serious international problems.²²

If that was the intention of the Obama administration, North Korea's reckless brinkmanship rapidly compelled it to intensify its approach to the DPRK. While Americans were focusing on North Korea's treatment of the two captive journalists and speculating on North Korea's intentions to conduct missile tests, despite warnings not to do so from the United States, China, and the United Nations, the Kim Jong-il regime launched a three-stage Taepodong-2 missile over the Pacific Ocean on April 5, knowing full well that it was a provocative act which would—and did—draw massive media attention in the United States.²³

Although the viability of the North Korean missile test was severely questioned by missile specialists,²⁴ the diplomatic brinkmanship embodied by the launch was fairly effective for North Korea's policy toward the United States and its Asian allies. That test partially disrupted Obama's very positive reception during a diplomatic tour of Europe and raised questions about the effectiveness of his overall foreign policy. Criticism from the United States and cooperative countries in the United Nations led North Korea to escalate its hostile rhetoric on nuclear weapons and to scorn the six-party talks in ways that put more geopolitical pressure on the still fledgling Obama administration.²⁵

Following that rhetorical surge, North Korea severely increased its attempts to put pressure on the United States during the Obama administration's fifth month in office. Early in May the DPRK Foreign Ministry accused Obama of following the same policy course as the preceding Bush administration.²⁶ Obama's efforts to support a U.S. free trade agreement with South Korea later in May, despite economic pressures for protectionism among many Americans,²⁷ tended to reinforce that DPRK accusation. North Korea's rhetoric increased in mid-May when the DPRK announced that it would be putting two captured American journalists on trial on June 4th.²⁸ During the remainder of May, North Korea moved well beyond rhetorical pressures by engaging in provocative nuclear²⁹ and missile tests.³⁰ Those tests were accompanied by North Korea's harsh warning toward South Korea that the Korean War armistice agreement no longer limited the DPRK's strategic options.³¹ In that serious context the U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates—formerly Secretary of Defense for President George W. Bush—was condescending toward DPRK brinkmanship, but also issued a warning to North Korea.³² The Obama administration also worked

more closely with South Korea and Japan to bolster the readiness of the United States' two alliance relationships to cope with North Korea's threatening brinkmanship.³³ These pressures from North Korea during May caused Secretary of Defense Gates to emphasize that issue during the so-called "Shangri-La Dialogue" of senior Asia-Pacific defense officials in Singapore³⁴ and caused the United States to exert pressure on the PRC to intensify its pressures on North Korea.³⁵ U.S. pressures on China also caused considerable domestic attention to be paid on how well the Obama administration was coping with North Korea in the early stage of its time in office.

Because of that turmoil in May the next couple of months were truly troubled. American attention to the administration's problems was intensified when the two captive journalists were put on trial and received a harsh sentence.³⁶ North Korea did, however, permit one of the two journalists, Laura Ling, to make a phone call to her sister who was told that a release might be possible if the United States and North Korea improved their communications. That communication may have reflected North Korea's understanding that this form of human brinkmanship might not work for them. It remained, however, a major problem for the Obama administration. Washington's need to pursue a tough approach to North Korea's nuclear and missile agendas did not mesh well with its hopes to help the two journalists, whose treatment the United States strongly criticized.³⁷ Ironically, United States caused North Korea to criticize the United States for being inaccurate and unfair. Given North Korea's widespread and well deserved reputation for rarely being either accurate or fair, Pyongyang's attempt to shift the blame to the United States backfired on the DPRK and helped President Obama on that issue.

On the more intense nuclear and missile agenda issues, however, the Obama administration was experiencing difficulties in coping with North Korea's brinkmanship, problems that did not reflect well on Obama's ability to cope with such serious geopolitical problems. In response, the Obama administration explored more assertive policies that were consistent with some conservative recommendations.³⁸ Predictably, North Korea practiced brinkmanship on its nuclear agenda. Whether or not North Korea's missile and nuclear ambitions were actually plausible have been—and shall likely remain—debatable, but they certainly received mixed attention in the United States.³⁹ The Obama administration's difficulties in maintaining a reasonably balanced

approach to North Korea's reckless brinkmanship was made even more difficult by heightened attention Kim Jong-il's possible successor and by widespread rumors about corruption within the DPRK leadership.

Because of the obvious risks Pyongyang's brinkmanship posed to the liberal-progressive Obama administration engaged in a well publicized dialogue with South Korea's very conservative Lee Myung-bak government. That dialogue became very public as a result of the June 16th Obama-Lee summit meeting in Washington, DC, and a press conference at the White House.⁴⁰ The summit received positive media attention before and after it was held. Obama made instructive comments about U.S. policy toward North Korea which—while not very specific—nonetheless drew creatively upon his campaign metaphor about “change.” He stated: “There’s been a pattern in the past where North Korea behaves in a belligerent fashion, and if it waits long enough [it] is then rewarded. We are going to break that pattern.”⁴¹ Clearly that was not the form of “change” which North Korea's hard-line advocates were hoping to cause in the Obama administration.

In the wake of that Presidential summit, senior defense officials from both countries held major talks in Seoul to coordinate their policies better regarding North Korea's aggressive posturing.⁴² One innovative policy the Obama administration pursued—that extended the DPRK's possible illicit arms supplying to Myanmar (Burma)⁴³—was a military program for tracking North Korean ships that might be carrying illicit materials.⁴⁴ The U.S. administration also created a new position at the Department of State by naming a senior diplomat—Philip Goldberg—to lead a task force to coordinate U.S. policies on North Korea with other concerned countries.⁴⁵ In reaction, the Kim Jong-il regime organized a very large—100,000 people—public protest in Pyongyang which received much publicity. The DPRK used the event to threaten the United States and South Korea with a “fire shower of nuclear retaliation,” if harsh actions were taken against North Korea.⁴⁶

Following that mid-June U.S.-ROK summit and North Korea's attempts to use public protests to derail U.S.-ROK efforts, North Korean issues drew more public attention in the United States during the following month. The United States tried to crack down on foreign companies—in Hong Kong and Iran—involved in commerce helpful to North Korea's missile and nuclear agendas.⁴⁷ The United States also condemned another round of North Korean missile tests and welcomed sanctions taken by the United Nations against the senior North Koreans

involved in the DPRK missile and nuclear programs.⁴⁸ There also was substantial attention paid to the possibility that North Koreans might have been involved in cyber attacks on international websites, doubts existed about those accusations.⁴⁹

Despite such controversial media issues, the U.S. also paid attention to potential changes in North Korea. There was press coverage of how and why the two captive journalists had not yet been sent to a prison-labor camp, but instead were being kept in a “guest house” in Pyongyang. Indeed, the DPRK told a visiting Korean-American scholar—Han S. Park (University of Georgia)—that the journalists could be released if the Obama administration apologized on their behalf.⁵⁰ There also was significant media coverage of Kim Jong-il’s weakening health status, the likelihood of his death, and its impact on his family, if a son succeeded him.⁵¹ Such media coverage of North Korea drew more attention to the Obama administration’s policies toward the DPRK.

Against that mixed background, following the Obama-Lee summit, the U.S. administration experienced some internal discord over how best to approach North Korea. Presumably that internal debate contributed to Secretary of State Clinton’s fairly blunt comments about North Korea during the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Thailand. After emphasizing the United States’ presence as a leader in Asia, Secretary Clinton was critical of North Korea and rejected the possibility of meeting DPRK representatives at the ARF.⁵² She also expressed concern about DPRK-Myanmar cooperation.⁵³ Not surprisingly, North Korea responded bluntly and harshly.⁵⁴

Despite such tensions, North Korea’s Foreign Ministry played another—more creative—aspect of its brinkmanship approach by stating its readiness to engage in nuclear talks, but not in the six-party format. Clearly, the North Korean government was trying to engage in bilateral U.S.-DPRK talks with the Obama administration. The U.S. Department of State responded by stating bilateral talks were feasible “but only in the context of the six-party talks.”⁵⁵ That situation caused media skepticism about the merits of Obama’s original goals of using a constructive diplomatic dialogue with troublesome states to resolve problems worsened by past administrations’ policies.

Given the apparently bleak status of U.S.-DPRK strategic and diplomatic relations, the American public—as well as observers throughout the world—were surprised when former President Bill Clinton and a U.S. delegation went to Pyongyang in early August to meet

with Kim Jong-il and senior DPRK officials. The visit was to arrange the release of the two captive American journalists, Laura Ling and Euna Lee. The meeting of the ex-U.S. president and North Korea's "dear leader," Kim Jong-il drew enormous attention in the United States.⁵⁶ American magazine coverage of the meeting with a color photo of the U.S. and DPRK teams, with Clinton and Kim seated side-by-side, presented a very different tone for U.S. –North Korean relations.⁵⁷ More important for U.S. policy prospects was the attention paid to Secretary of State Clinton's role in helping initiate the process⁵⁸ and to the role of a senior U.S. intelligence specialist on North Korean affairs in setting up the visit.⁵⁹

Well after the Clinton trip, the two released reporters used the *Current TV* website to present their views of what had happened to them.⁶⁰ In the wake of Clinton's visit, as inter-Korean relations evolved in some positive ways, the Obama administration paid close attention to changes in North Korea's attitudes and policies, and President Obama met with former President Clinton to express his interest in and appreciation for the North Korean effort.⁶¹ How significant the Clinton trip may prove for future Obama administration policy decisions is unclear, but it is possible that future changes may warrant the label of the "Clinton Effect" used by a Chinese analyst of inter-Korean affairs.⁶²

After having made a conciliatory gesture to the United States over the two reporters, North Korea tried to offset the negative repercussions of its missile and nuclear brinkmanship, tactics which had brought the conservative South Korean government and the liberal Obama administration closer together. It now began a return to the DPRK's former cross-border cooperation with South Korea, stemming originally from the "Sunshine" policy. The DPRK announced its intentions to reopen the DPRK-ROK border for cooperative economic activities, tourism, and divided family reunions. This caused South Korea to reexamine what North Korea was doing in a more positive manner.⁶³ North Korea then followed suite, sending a delegation from the North Korean diplomatic mission at the United Nations in New York to meet with New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson on August 19. Given Richardson's prior experiences with North Korea, it was clear that the North Korean efforts were intended to convey the message that Pyongyang wanted Richardson's words: that the DPRK is "now prepared to have a dialogue with us."⁶⁴

That possible shift in U.S.-DPRK relations, based on North Korean efforts to restore some of its ties with South Korea, experienced a truly major transformative event when former ROK President Kim Dae-jung died on August 18 after a life of significant achievements via his “Sunshine Policy” toward North Korea. (For which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000). The funeral ceremony on August 23 primarily focused on Kim Dae-jung’s achievements and his legacy for Korea as a whole. It also proved to be a significant turning point for the two Koreas because of the actions of the South Korean hosts and of the North Korean delegation. Both could jointly identify with what Kim had accomplished in pursuit of reconciling inter-Korean tensions and achieving progress en route to peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula. The North Korean delegation also had important meetings with senior South Korean officials. The day before the funeral the ROK’s Unification Minister, Hyun In-taek, met North Korea’s “spy chief” in charge of inter-Korean issues, Kim Yang-gon, for useful talks.⁶⁵ The following day, prior to the Sunday ceremony, the North Korean delegation met with ROK President Lee Myung-bak, at the presidential Blue House and conveyed a positive message from Kim Jong-il about Pyongyang’s desires to reduce inter-Korean tensions and work toward a positive agenda.⁶⁶ Interestingly for the Obama administration, a senior South Korean Asian affairs scholar—Lee Su-hoon of Kyungnam University—wrote very positively about Bill Clinton’s impact on these events, saying “Mr. Clinton’s visit prompted South Korea to re-examine its inflexible stance towards the North.”⁶⁷ Clearly, the message was that the Obama administration could, and should, pursue “change” via flexibility.

Soon after the Kim Dae-jung funeral-linked meetings, more progress was achieved. North Korea, which had not permitted inter-Korean family reunions for two years, authorized family reunions to be restarted. It also decided to free four South Korean fishermen, whose boat went astray in North Korean waters on July 30. Both decisions were well received in South Korea. When North Korea followed through on September 1 with its earlier announced decision to open its borders with South Korea for economic and family purposes, Kim Jong-il also renewed the DPRK’s request for talks with the United States, focused on creating a peace treaty which would formally end the Korean War by replacing the existing truce.⁶⁸ Although the Obama administration’s senior State Department specialist on North Korea, Ambassador Stephen

Bosworth, was at that time preparing for an Asian tour—not including North Korea—to encourage resumption of the six-party talks process, it was widely expected in South Korea that the newly elected liberal government in Japan—under the Democratic Party of Japan and its Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama—would be amenable to Japan-DPRK bilateral talks. Later in September, North Korea used its ties with China to express its willingness to engage in talks with the United States on the nuclear issue.⁶⁹ These indications of progress plus prospects for further supportive actions by the Korean peninsula’s Asian neighbors—notably China and Japan—could set the stage for improved U.S. policies toward North Korea for the remainder of the Obama administration and beyond.

That hopeful possibility was altered by two events which stemmed from President Obama’s global agenda. In late September Obama gave a major speech to the U.N. General Assembly in which he called for global cooperation en route to the peaceful resolution of significant problems and advocated international policies that would end all countries’ possession and possible use of nuclear weapons.⁷⁰ On October 9, the international community – and President Obama – were surprised by the announcement that the U.S. President had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for what the Nobel Committee described as “his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples.”⁷¹ That announcement produced convoluted reactions worldwide. Most salient for present purposes, South Korean President Lee reacted positively⁷² and North Korea remained basically silent as it had after Obama was elected President.

Those two developments contributed to setting the stage for President Obama’s second summit with President Lee when they met in Seoul on November 19 during the President’s diplomatic tour of Asia that included Japan, China, and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum meeting in Singapore. With Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize looming in the background, the Obama-Lee summit was also influenced by earlier positive and negative developments in inter-Korean relations. At the Obama-Lee meeting President Obama stated the United States’ readiness to use President Lee’s “grand bargain” soft power metaphor to induce North Korea to change its nuclear agenda and indicated that his envoy, Ambassador Stephen Bosworth, would be engaging in bilateral U.S.-DPRK talks.⁷³

Although Obama’s trip to Asia, including his meeting with President Lee, received mixed reactions, it did help the stage for Bosworth’s trip to

North Korea.⁷⁴ That visit followed the path of the relatively brief October 2008 meeting in Pyongyang by the Bush administration's Assistant Secretary of State, Christopher Hill, and Korean officials. Occurring December 8-10, it drew substantial media attention in the United States.⁷⁵ While some press coverage emphasized that the meeting did not induce North Korea to return to the six-party nuclear talks, Ambassador Bosworth's post-meeting comments on that issue were more optimistic about future prospects.⁷⁶ That guarded sense of optimism was bolstered by North Korea's official KCNA comments on the Bosworth meeting and by the international press coverage of North Korea's assessment of the visit.⁷⁷

As important as Bosworth's trip appeared to be, the visit attracted a different level of attention when it was revealed that President Obama had discreetly sent a letter to Kim Jong Il via Ambassador Bosworth, a letter that a South Korean news agency (Yon hap) reported, had suggested the creation of a U.S. liaison office in North Korea.⁷⁸ Amidst these developments on the U.S.-DPRK diplomatic front, Obama drew far more attention globally when he made a major speech about war and peace in Oslo as he received his Nobel Peace Prize. Although his approach to North Korea was briefly included in his Oslo speech, the core of his remarks focused on his approach to the geopolitical concept of a "just war" and its relevance to the pursuit of meaningful peace.⁷⁹ That theme proved to be controversial for pundits on U.S. foreign policy and for analysts of the merits of a renewed call for peace in U.S. policy.⁸⁰ Despite the international focus on Obama's potential peace agenda, in the remaining weeks of 2009, his administration had to deal with the controversy surrounding Thailand's seizure of North Korean weaponry cargo being illegally shipped in an airplane that was being refueled in Bangkok.⁸¹ Such pressures on North Korea may also have been bolstered by allegations late in 2009 by the controversial Pakistani nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan about North Korea's past nuclear agenda.⁸²

In that tense context, Bosworth's visit still seemed significant as it put the United States and North Korea back on a dialogue track, even though there were no specific agreements reached. When coupled with North Korea's post-visit problems and the international community's how President Obama may or might pursue innovative policy goals consistent with his Nobel Peace Prize, it could enhance the U.S.-DPRK dialogue process. That potential was underscored by North Korea's

2010 New Year's message to the United States, a message that sought "an end to the hostile relationship" and encouraged pursuit of a peace treaty to improve both U.S.-DPRK and DPRK-ROK relations.⁸³ Within a week the PRC's Ambassador to the United Nations, Zhang Ye Sui, recommended at a news conference that the United States and the DPRK "meet each other half way" to help restart the six-party talks.⁸⁴ Shortly after that, North Korea proposed peace treaty talks with the United States, but lack of progress on the six-party talks caused the United States and South Korea to make it clear they could only engage in peace treaty talks after the six-party talks had been resumed and had made serious progress.⁸⁵ All of these developments in late 2009 and early 2010 helped set the stage for Obama's future policies regarding North Korea.

The Obama Administration's Policy Options Regarding North Korea

The Obama administration's potential policy options vis-à-vis North Korea will be considered in two overall contexts—one very negative and pessimistic, the other normally positive and optimistic for U.S. foreign policy. The first shall be assessed here very briefly because one must hope—with a strong sense of realism—that it is unlikely to occur.

The United States' concerns about North Korea from the early post-World War II era to the present have always been predicated on the United States' being a global power with major interests in nearly all sectors of the world. Had the United States in the mid-1940s reverted to its pre-war isolationism, many policies that Washington actually pursued would never have occurred. Clearly, that would have included the United States' roles in the Korean War, in the post-armistice U.S.-ROK alliance, and in decades of political, economic, and strategic animosity between the United States and the DPRK. The pros and cons of U.S. abstention for both the ROK and the DPRK are obvious. Far less "obvious" are the consequences for both contemporary Koreans, had the United States retracted from active global involvement.

Were the current economic recession to become unfathomably worse than virtually all Americans anticipate—yielding circumstances as bad as or worse than the Great Depression—strategic "depression" in the form of a renewed isolationism could also occur. Similarly, were other individual countries or groups of countries to acquire superior socio-economic as well as military stature to overshadow the United States, the

impact upon American's strategic confidence and global ambitions could be very negative. On another pessimistic front, were the United States to experience major strategic setbacks in its geopolitical entanglements by losing questionable wars in the anti-terrorist activities, it could shatter American confidence as a major player in world affairs. Were any pessimistic scenario of that sort to develop for the Obama administration, there would be no need to examine its options vis-à-vis North Korea. Those negative scenarios regarding North Korea will not be examined here because they are unlikely to materialize, although a credible case can be made for a somewhat reduced U.S. role in world affairs, one still designed to preserve U.S. geopolitical power and influence.

Negative scenarios are, however, also worth acknowledging in order to contrast the positive circumstances that the Obama administration's policy needs to draw upon. They are important to indicate why North Korean leaders have ample reasons to be glad that such improbable negative circumstances are unlikely to occur. Although North Korean leaders are unlikely to acknowledge it openly, they can benefit from the United States' playing active roles in their region. If the United States' role in Asia were to collapse, North Korea would no longer be able to use its brinkmanship leverage—much less have any hopes for future assistance from the United States. Despite Pyongyang's animosity toward the United States, among the last things that the DPRK should want is a serious deterioration of U.S. international power which would severely weaken Washington's ability to use a 'soft power' option toward North Korea.

Before concluding this analysis with specific recommendations for the Obama administration, it is worthwhile to examine some of the suggestions various analysts have already offered. Several columnists will be assessed chronologically. In the mid-April context of concerns about North Korea's missile tests, a prominent libertarian from the Cato Institute, Ted Galen Carpenter, suggested that the Obama administration try to persuade the PRC to pursue a regime change policy toward Pyongyang—replacing it with a more pragmatic government willing to cooperate with China and the United States on overlapping policy issues related to threats posed by the DPRK.⁸⁶ While that could be a plausible option if the United States seriously feared a North Korean missile or nuclear threat, that degree of fear is questionable because of how North Korea manipulates fear to make brinkmanship effective. In addition, for such an option to be viable for China, the PRC would have to have

confidence in its ability to make regime change effective. One of the last things China—and the United States—would want to occur is the replacement of the Kim Jong-il regime or its dynastic successor with a less stable government which might be even more recklessly dangerous. Hence, while the Obama administration can keep such an option in its file of potential choices, it is unlikely to utilize it unless North Korea becomes far more dangerous to the United States and China, as well as to South Korea and Japan.

In late June a former Congressman, Stephen Solarz, and a Brookings Institution researcher, Michael O'Hanlon, urged the Obama administration to work closely with China because of its economic stature in Asia. In this way Washington could put pressure on North Korea—compelling it to choose between “economic collapse” or the “verifiable dismantling” of Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities.⁸⁷ While a possible option for the Obama administration, the risks for China’s going too far too fast make it an unlikely choice for Beijing. Therefore that particular China option is little more than a remote option for the Obama administration. To become more plausible for the United States and China, the Obama administration would have to be willing to sanction a larger geopolitical role for China, one that would strengthen its regional influence over South Korea and Japan relative to the United States. Therefore, while possible, it is unlikely.

Another aspect in the debate over the most appropriate way for the United States to deal with North Korea’s is the degree to which Washington should engage in a constructive U.S.-DPRK dialogue versus abstaining from any such dialogue to send a crucial message from Washington to Pyongyang. There have been solid scholarly analyses about why and how Obama should pursue cooperative contacts with the DPRK, ones capable of stabilizing the situation and creating more peaceful relations. Mark Manyin and Mary Beth Nikitin of the Congressional Research Service advocated closer U.S.-DPRK economic and humanitarian assistance relations.⁸⁸ Leon Sigal, of the Social Science Research Council, has criticized the Obama administration for following too many of the same flawed policies used by the preceding Bush administration and has urged the current administration to expand its dialogues and “restore constructive engagement.”⁸⁹ Lastly, Tae-Hwan Kwak, a Korean-American emeritus professor and former president of the Korea Institute for National Unification (KINU) has made a strong case for the United States role in an inter-Korean “peace-regime-building

process.”⁹⁰ Were any, or all, of these suggestions to be adopted by the Obama administration, the United States would benefit from an improved and expanded U.S.-DPRK dialogue with the potential for making significant progress.

Taking a very different approach, three prominent think tank analysts, while not rejecting constructive dialogues with a potential for success, have expressed skepticism about the ability to accomplish much vis-à-vis North Korea because of its tendency to manipulate such U.S. and South Korean efforts for the DPRK’s policy purposes. Cato Institute libertarian analyst Doug Bandow, who has written extensively on Korean affairs, has expressed skepticism about the degree to which North Korean threats are real. He has stated, “Pyongyang poses no meaningful danger to America” and concludes “The next time Pyongyang rattles its sabers, Washington should respond with bored contempt.”⁹¹ A similar approach has been advocated by Edward Luttwak of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. He has expressed pointed skepticism about President Obama’s pursuit of a dialogue to improve U.S.-DPRK relations and avoid the risks of war. He has been scornful of Washington’s willingness to adhere to policies reminiscent of “Winston Churchill’s dictum that it is always better to ‘jaw-jaw than war-war’.” Instead, he has urged the United States to use a “diplomacy of silence” regarding North Korea.⁹² Another libertarian analyst, Ivan Eland of the Independent Institute, has expressed similar skepticism about the merits of engaging North Korea in serious dialogues—even as he has expressed scorn for neo-conservative advocacy of a more “belligerent policy toward North Korea.” To Eland, the Kim Jong-il regime’s hostility toward the United States is akin to a “child’s tantrum.” He has suggested “treating Kim like a child, the U.S. should simply ignore North Korea and its belligerent posturing.” And he has concluded “Doing nothing is doing something and is much better than the ill-advised policy the United States currently has toward North Korea.”⁹³ While these options are plausible in principle, they could entail risks in practice that the Obama administration is unlikely to accept. Nonetheless, the existence of such options could be useful because of the ways President Obama could send signals to Pyongyang. Such tactics could make North Korea more responsive to other U.S. options.

Conclusion

While the Obama administration clearly should be wary of the dismal scenarios briefly outlined above and should pay serious attention to the pros and cons of the advice it has already received from various pundits working on U.S. policy toward North Korea, there are other policy options it may wish to consider. Three are outlined in this concluding section. Since all three options would involve innovative approaches, requiring some boldness on the part of the U.S. government, were the Obama administration to pursue these options it should bear in mind the campaign slogan which did so much to get Obama elected president of the United States—"yes we can!" Any doubts about pursuing a bold policy option on the part of skeptics should be perceived as being in the "no we can't" camp of the President.

As the Obama administration's foreign policy position is being bolstered by the bureaucratic accomplishments of Secretary of State Clinton, it is also being hampered by political doubts about the merits of the administration's emphasis on the Afghanistan War as well as winding down the Iraq War and coping with serious economic uncertainties. Such factors have caused the Obama administration's foreign policy approaches to be more cautiously pragmatic than some of his liberal-progressive supporters had assumed it would be.

Bearing that fact in mind and drawing upon the Bill Clinton's successful visit to Pyongyang, President Obama should consider a policy option which would make use of ex-President Jimmy Carter via the Carter Center and Emory University. The Carter Center's activities are focused on three themes: Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, and Building Hope.⁹⁴ While all of them could be salient to U.S. policy toward North Korea, the "Waging Peace" theme has several specific "programs" keyed to issues or regions. The Obama administration should consider urging former President Carter to sponsor a "Korea Program" in its "Waging Peace" section.

Given Carter's stature as a 2002 recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize for Carter Center activities "to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts,"⁹⁵ he is well qualified to host and administer a "Korea Program." That is underscored by the Carter administration's troubled record in dealing with the Koreagate scandal and Korean issues and Carter's personal efforts, out of office, to help the inter-Korean and U.S.-DPRK diplomatic processes by visiting North Korea in June 1994 and

negotiating an agreed framework. He also met with Kim Il-Sung in Pyongyang almost three weeks before Kim died.⁹⁶

An Obama administration-backed initiative for a “Korea Program” at the Carter Center, with a commitment to future U.S. government-backed funding for its activities, would facilitate American efforts to negotiate a Korean Peace Treaty, establish normalized U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relations, and encourage additional presidential diplomacy vis-à-vis North Korea. That would draw on both Presidents’ Nobel Peace Prizes in ways that would bolster Obama’s legitimacy as a Nobel Peace Prize recipient. The Carter Center’s ability to develop and operate a “Korea Program” would also be useful for expanding a U.S. dialogue with North Korean officials and scholars by interacting in the United States with the numerous university-based academic centers for East Asian studies, which include researchers on Korean affairs. These scholars should be invited to participate in Carter Center conferences on U.S.-DPRK issues. The more such scholarly interaction occurs, the more American and North Korean specialists would be exposed to the other country’s cadre of academic and governmental specialists on U.S.-DPRK affairs.

Another institutional policy option the Obama administration should consider en route to improving U.S. policy toward North Korea would be the creation of a U.S. government-funded “U.S. Center for Korean Reunification Studies,” either at an American university or as an independent think tank. It could be located in Washington, D.C., in or near a city with a significant Korean-American community, or in a locale distant from either in order to spread the American people’s consciousness of the importance of Korean unification into broader intellectual circles.

The proposed U.S. Center for Korean Reunification Studies would conduct research, organize and host conferences, publish salient research studies, send its research staff members to conferences and meetings in both South and North Korea, and host visiting scholars from both North and South Korea. This proposed U.S. Center could also interact creatively with the proposed Carter Center Korea Program, if that program is created.

While Korean unification will primarily be the responsibility of Koreans in both the ROK and the DPRK, other countries—notably China, Japan, other Asian neighboring states, and the United States—also have reasons to be kept informed about the inter-Korean dialogues and to try to help the two Koreas achieve their goals. It is most likely

that the United States, during the Obama administration and its successors, will prefer to interact with a non-nuclear armed but unified Korea.

There is, of course, a geopolitical argument that favors the proliferation of nuclear weapons, based on the fact that nuclear armed countries have a solid record of not attacking each other. Thus the world would actually be safer if that solid record were grasped by other potential nuclear powers. In that context, North Korea's nuclear weapons agenda could actually become more dangerous if the DPRK ever collapsed and lost control of those nuclear weapons. To avoid that possibility, the Obama administration—and its successors—should consider the plausible advantages of a U.S. Center for Korean Reunification Studies either advocating a “democratic, unified and eventually nonnuclear Korea”⁹⁷ or a United Korea with nuclear arms in a balanced triangular strategic relationship, surrounded by a nuclear armed China and Japan and, in addition, a nuclear armed Russia to their north and a nuclear armed United States in the Western Pacific. That option—admittedly unlikely—also would make it easier to cope with North Korea's brinkmanship agenda.

If these two proposed U.S. government-backed research projects are pursued and established by the Obama administration, there would be expanded opportunities for the President to interact personally with Kim Jong-il. Using the U.S.-USSR precedent, this might prove helpful in stabilizing relations.⁹⁸ Even if neither of the two proposed research center projects ever are created by the Obama administration, the U.S. government should reconsider utilizing the initial open-handed approach it endorsed during the campaign. In order to make serious progress, in achieving such goals, the United States should consider inviting Kim Jong-il—or his successor—to the United States to meet President Obama. Such a bilateral meeting could be at Camp David with less publicity or at the White House with full-scale publicity. It might also be held in New York City at the United Nations. If such a bilateral summit focusing on both contentious and cooperative issues were to achieve some degree of success, Obama should consider a reciprocal trip to North Korea. That summit could and should be followed by Obama's meeting with South Korean, Japanese, and Chinese leaders to explain the agenda and hopefully the accomplishments of this summit diplomacy.

Such U.S.-DPRK summitry would be intrinsically valuable, but it would be even better for pursuing overall U.S. interests vis-à-vis Korea if

done either in connection with establishing or legitimizing the proposed research organizations. The more positive the Obama administration can be regarding a “yes we can” attitude toward a constructive diplomatic dialogue with North Korea, the better the prospects for achieving and maintaining peaceful relations with North Korea. This would help the two Koreas reconcile their differences, working toward the achievement of inter-Korean reconciliation, and developing a U.S.-United Korea special relationship akin to the American-British version of the U.S.-UK geopolitical bond.

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