

Putting People Before Plutonium

Frank Jannuzi

The recent leadership shake-up in Pyongyang has thrust the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) back onto the front pages. And while it is too soon to fully assess what impact the removal of Jang Song Thaek will have on the course of the country, his purge should remind all that North Korea is not a one-dimensional problem. It requires a multi-dimensional solution and an approach by the United States that is more "can-do."

Until recently, one of the less appreciated facets of the conundrum posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was its human rights record. Yet there should no longer be any doubt about the scale of the unfolding human catastrophe there or that it merits urgent attention.

Amnesty International has chronicled the DPRK's endemic [human rights abuses](#). Millions suffer extreme forms of repression and violations across nearly the entire spectrum of human rights. The government severely restricts freedom of movement, expression, information and association. Food insecurity is widespread, and there are persistent reports of starvation in more remote regions. As confirmed by recent Amnesty International satellite analyses and eye-witness reports, roughly 100,000 people—including children—are arbitrarily held in political [prison camps](#) and other detention facilities where they are subjected to forced labor, denial of food as punishment, torture, and public executions.

In January 2013, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, said that North Korea had "one of the worst – but least understood and reported—human rights situations in the

[world](#).” And last March, the UN Human Rights Council launched a Commission of Inquiry to examine allegations of “systemic, widespread and grave” human rights violations inside the DPRK, including crimes against humanity. The Commission will report its findings next spring.

But, of course, the real question is not whether there are human rights abuses taking place in the North. The question is what can be done about them.

Much the same can be said about the North’s nuclear conundrum. There is no longer uncertainty about the nature of the problem. In defiance of the United Nations Security Council, the DPRK has produced fissile material, tested three nuclear devices, developed long-range missiles and constructed a modern facility capable of enriching uranium. Comprehensive economic sanctions have neither crippled the DPRK’s ability to develop its nuclear arsenal nor persuaded its leaders to change course. In fact, the coercive tactics often favored by the international community—sanctions, diplomatic isolation, travel restrictions, limits on cultural and educational exchanges, suspension of humanitarian assistance and more—have arguably bolstered the legitimacy of those in Pyongyang who fear openness more than isolation.

“Military First” Approach a Failure (and Not Just for Pyongyang)

For the better part of 30 years, the United States and its allies have been trying to convince the DPRK to abandon its pursuit of nuclear weapons, with disappointing results. Most efforts, including the 1994 Agreed Framework, at least acknowledged up front that the nuclear issue was enmeshed in larger questions about the past, present, and future of the Korean peninsula. Those issues include ending the Korean War,

establishing a permanent peace mechanism on the peninsula and integrating the DPRK into Northeast Asia's economic and political community.

Some initiatives, especially the Republic of Korea's "Sunshine Policy," were also designed to lay the groundwork for the eventual peaceful unification of North and South Korea. More recently, President Park Geun-[hye](#) launched her "*Trustpolitik*," recognizing that the North's nuclear weapons program is as much a symptom of underlying security concerns as it is the driver of them. President Park pitched her approach as one designed to separate humanitarian from security issues in the interest of building confidence and creating an atmosphere more conducive to forging peace and denuclearization.

But even while acknowledging the complexity of the challenge, these various attempts to change North Korea's trajectory have mostly been focused on the narrow goal of denuclearization. Framework [agreements](#) have been struck. Cooling towers have been destroyed and international monitoring schemes devised. Leap Day deals have been [crafted](#). All to convince the DPRK that living without nuclear weapons offered a pathway to genuine security preferable to the security offered by hugging a few kilograms of fissile material nestled inside a nuclear weapon.

But few nations, least of all the DPRK, are inclined to disarm first and negotiate peace second. And the few times in recent memory when this approach has been tried cannot offer Pyongyang any encouragement. As Jeffrey Sachs [wrote](#) last spring:

In 2003, Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi agreed with the US and Europe to end his pursuit of nuclear and chemical weapons in order to normalize relations

with the West. Eight years later, NATO abetted his overthrow and murder. Now we are asking North Korea to end its nuclear program as we once asked of Qaddafi. North Korea's leaders must be wondering what would await them if they agree.

If the United States and North Korea's neighbors hope to convince the DPRK to change course, they will need to keep a few basic facts in mind. First, the international community must not approach talks with the DPRK as if they were surrender negotiations. The leadership of the DPRK must see something of value in the negotiations for them. As President Carter told me before heading to Pyongyang in 1994 to sit down with Kim Il-Sung, "Kim Il-Sung wants my respect, and I'm going to give it to him." Second, while it would surely set back the goal of denuclearization if the international community formally recognized the DPRK as a nuclear weapons power, former Secretary of Defense William Perry's admonition to deal with the DPRK "as it is, not as we would wish it to be" still has merit. The DPRK's nuclear and missile tests have altered the negotiating environment, and to pretend otherwise is folly. Finally, the North may be *sui generis*, but that does not mean that its leaders come from [Mars](#) or that their behavior is impossible to understand. In fact, many DPRK-watchers have good track records predicting how the North is likely to respond to various diplomatic threats or inducements.

These stubborn facts do not bode well for Washington's most recent efforts to convince the DPRK to make a strategic choice to abandon its nuclear capabilities. The Obama Administration is demanding that the DPRK demonstrate its sincere commitment to denuclearization by taking concrete steps in advance of the resumption of Six Party Talks. The DPRK counters that it remains committed to the goals, including

denuclearization, enumerated in the 2005 Joint Statement issued by participants in those talks. It seeks resumption of dialogue “without preconditions.” If the United States sticks with its current approach, the DPRK is likely to seize the initiative in ways that will only exacerbate existing tensions, perhaps by testing another long-range missile or accelerating efforts to enhance its nuclear capacity [as we are seeing with the restart of its 5 MW reactor at Yongbyon.](#)

So, as Secretary of State John Kerry and Ambassador Glynn Davies, the US Special Envoy for North Korea, ponder how best to kick start the moribund Six Party process, they should heed the advice of British Parliamentarian Lord David Alton, chairman of the British-DPRK All-Party Parliamentarian Group, who recently recommended a nuanced, carefully calibrated peace process, rather than a “military first” policy, to achieve the goal of denuclearization. Drawing lessons from the Helsinki Process of the 1980s, Alton [wrote](#), “What is needed now is a painstaking and patient bridge-building strategy, one which cajoles and coaxes, but does not appease.”

Altering the Playing Field—To Pyongyang via Helsinki

It’s time for the United States to launch a multilateral initiative designed to attack the DPRK’s nuclear ambitions enfilade rather than by frontal assault. The objective would be to shift the focus of diplomacy from the North’s plutonium to its people through a multilateral, multifaceted engagement strategy based on the Helsinki process launched by the United States and its allies during the Cold War.

A Helsinki-style engagement strategy would have to be comprehensive, building multiple bridges of engagement. It could be designed to augment, rather than replace the Six Party Talks, assuming they can be resuscitated. Eventually, the

parties must grapple with the North's pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, but the Helsinki-style approach would begin with a more modest agenda focused on confidence and security building measures to reduce tensions and the risk of conflict emerging from miscommunication or miscalculation. Other dialogue topics would include energy security, economic modernization, agriculture reform, international trade and finance, social welfare, health policy, education, legal and judicial systems, women's rights, refugees, freedom of religion and belief and the rights of the disabled.

Engagement of this sort would have to be given time to succeed. It does not offer a quick fix to end the North's nuclear ambitions or eliminate its human rights violations, but neither do the alternatives of coercive diplomacy or military strikes. The goal would be to so fundamentally alter the situation that a treaty ending the Korean War and denuclearizing the Korean peninsula would be within reach rather than a bridge too far.

This approach has a number of advantages. First, it has the potential to unify South Korean progressives, who first embraced the notion under the presidency of Kim Dae-jung, and conservatives, who see potential for it based on the model of German unification. Second, Helsinki-style engagement has proven its value already, helping to promote economic reform and greater respect for human rights inside the nations of the Soviet bloc. Third, it offers a step-by-step approach suited to a political environment devoid of trust. Initial small-scale confidence building measures—reciprocal actions that signal peaceful intentions—could create an environment more conducive to taking larger risks for peace. Finally, an inclusive, regional approach allays concerns that any one country would dominate the structure. It would also allow middle powers to play a constructive role—note the [helpful advice on freedom of](#)

[expression](#) Mongolian President Elbegdorj offered Kim Jong-Un in a speech to students at Kim Il Sung University during his recent visit to Pyongyang. [Obama Administration: please also note the deft way Elbegdorj combined soccer diplomacy with his official state visit.]

So why hasn't the Helsinki concept gained more traction in the corridors of the Old Executive Office Building or the State Department? Perhaps because the necessary preconditions for a Helsinki process have not been met. The 1975 Helsinki Final Act did not *begin* the process of détente; it followed it. The wind-down of proxy wars in Southeast Asia, the agreement that "Mutually Assured Destruction" was *not* a preferred strategic nuclear doctrine, and the success of the first fledgling steps at superpower arms control all *preceded* the Helsinki Accords.

Jump-starting détente in Northeast Asia will require a bold diplomatic opening—think Kissinger to China bold. President Obama would have to channel the "yes we can" spirit of 2008 rather than the "oh, no we shouldn't" spirit of 2013. And the President will need to coordinate his approach with North Korea's neighbors and other potential partners, almost all of whom seem likely to embrace any move that breathes fresh life into the diplomatic process.

Is this politically feasible? Diplomatic overtures to Pyongyang are rarely popular, but if recent polling data on US efforts to engage Iran are any guide, there may be more support for engagement than the President's advisers realize. Americans by a [two-to-one margin](#) support striking a deal with Iran, even if that deal requires sanctions relief and results only in restrictions on, and not elimination of, Iran's nuclear program. The United States should follow President Park's lead and

move forward with a process of rapprochement. It should not set preconditions, such as requiring concrete steps by the DPRK to demonstrate its sincerity about denuclearization. The DPRK is NOT sincere about denuclearization...yet. And it won't be until more fundamental changes in Northeast Asia are affected through a Helsinki-style multilateral process of engagement.

It's hard to say exactly how the DPRK would respond to such an opening. Even with the purge of Jang, who was widely rumored to be a supporter of economic engagement with China, there exists a constituency for reform and opening up inside the DPRK. Officials managing energy policy, agriculture, light industry, science, and education have much to gain from reducing North Korea's political and economic isolation and cultivating foreign investment, trade, and exchanges. But their clout has been undercut by years of failed nuclear diplomacy and heightened military tension. Kim Jong Un and his cohorts cannot navigate the path toward peace and denuclearization in the dark. The world must illuminate that path for them.

So as already mentioned, the United States and other members of the international community would be well advised initially to press for small, but real, confidence and security building measures. Carefully calibrated economic initiatives could follow, designed to bolster civilian, market-oriented agricultural and light industrial ventures. With time and effort, it is possible that the leaders of the DPRK could be persuaded—by both internal and external stimuli—to stop their provocations and begin to unleash the creative potential of the North Korean people. As this process gains momentum—bolstered by cultural and educational exchanges and humanitarian assistance—North Korea's leaders would gain the confidence they need to shelve and then abandon their

nuclear weapons; decoupling their own futures from the North's limited nuclear arsenal. If engagement with the DPRK followed a trajectory similar to that of engagement with China, the people of North Korea would be among the earliest beneficiaries, seeing an improvement in all aspects of their lives, from nutrition and health to respect for their fundamental human rights.

Time to be Bold

The Administration's approach toward the DPRK has come to be known as strategic patience. "[Wise and masterly inactivity](#)" can sometimes be an effective tactic for defusing tension. But in this case, inactivity not only invites DPRK provocations, but also does nothing to encourage reforms or alleviate the suffering of the North Korean people.

While there are no signs that the Obama administration is poised to launch any new initiatives in Northeast Asia, if talks with Iran are successful, that might change. The smart choice is to be bold. Engage Pyongyang without delay, not as a reward for bad behavior, but because it offers the best chance to gradually influence North Korea's conduct, encouraging it to respect international norms, protect the human rights of its people, and abandon its nuclear weapons.

The 1975 Helsinki Accords set the stage for the end of the Cold War in Europe and led to the creation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The Helsinki process worked in part because it built people-to-people contacts that translated later into political pressure for reform and opening up. It worked because it offered things of value to both sides in the Cold War, including enhanced security, tension-reduction, and economic opportunities. It is not hard to imagine the potential of a similar mechanism to improve the

lives of all people living on or neighboring the Korean peninsula.

The views expressed are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Amnesty International, USA.