

Say the U-word

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Here is the recurring problematic of U.S. policy toward North Korea: Policy starts out principled and long-term, with a clarion call for irreversible denuclearization, the promise of a transformed relationship with Pyongyang and the requisite assurances of close coordination with allies. Invariably, this policy ends up becoming incremental, tactical and reactive, as sterile debates over bilateral-versus-multilateral negotiating venues, who pays for the next tranche of heavy fuel oil shipment to North Korea, or attempts to modulate the level of sanctions pressure levied on the regime until the next incremental agreement on freezing plutonium production ends up as the substance of the policy, displacing any semblance of the original long-term goal.

It has happened several times before, and it appears to be happening again. The Obama Administration was in the midst of its strategic policy review when North Korea forced its hand. Inclined to continue with the Six-Party Talks and related agreements, and interested in meeting at higher levels bilaterally with the North Koreans if this would help accelerate the denuclearization

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process, Obama was knocked back on his heels by DPRK ballistic missile tests in April, a nuclear test in May and more ballistic missile tests in July.

Obama reacted to these provocations by adopting a position remarkably close to that of his predecessor. The international community, Obama said, would not be extorted again. Knowingly or not, the Administration adopted liberal *bête noir* John Bolton's language by demanding "verifiable and irreversible denuclearization." It pushed for UN (not just U.S.) sanctions, including financial sanctions and an arms embargo. And it privileged the multilateral Six-Party Talks over bilateral ones. In undertaking these hawkish measures Obama got the editorial page of the *New York Times* to support the very same policy tenets that it vociferously opposed during the Bush Administration. What that says about the shrewd sense of timing in Pyongyang or the Obama Administration's policy instincts remains to be debated.

Then, in August 2009, former President Bill Clinton went to Pyongyang to retrieve two American journalists detained by North Korea after allegedly straying across the China-DRPK border. The successful visit raised the potential for re-engagement by Pyongyang in nuclear negotiations. The Obama Administration reacted by putting Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and National Security Advisor Jim Jones on the airwaves the weekend after Bubba's return, hinting at a renewed U.S. willingness to talk. What happened to the President's tough talk? What happened, alas, to the Administration's own strategic policy review?

Previous negotiators will tell you that a longer-term vision always guides U.S. policy, regardless of what looks like an out-of-the-pocket quarterback scramble. As a former negotiator, I can empathize with that view. After all, Bill Clinton set out his vision for a transformed Washington-Pyongyang relationship as the key to denuclearization as he hosted North Korean General Jo Myung-rok at the White House in 2000. George W. Bush outlined his vision for achieving denuclearization through the 2005 Six-Party joint statement. But the truth is that, with Pyongyang's unwillingness to negotiate in good faith rendering actual results unlikely, our tendency is to try to "park" the North Korea problem in a non-crisis gear so we

can move on to other equally pressing issues. It's no wonder that our North Korea policy always ends up reactive and incremental rather than proactive and goal-driven.

It is increasingly clear to most observers that true denuclearization cannot be achieved under the Kim Jong-il regime. Bootless attempts to negotiate these weapons away go back arguably over 24 years to the George H.W. Bush Administration. The North Koreans appear intent on becoming and remaining a full-fledged nuclear weapons state. After years of liberals' complaints that George W. Bush purposefully torpedoed the Clinton-era Agreed Framework with false accusations of North Korean cheating, Pyongyang in October 2009 admitted in writing to the UN Security Council that it was in the final stages of uranium enrichment—about the most explicit statement of cheating on Clinton's agreement that a country could make. Nukes are indeed North Korea's endgame, and Pyongyang has stayed the course in achieving it despite bumps in the road. The question is: What is our endgame?

The stated endgame for the Six-Party Talks is denuclearization. This should continue to be the case. But the true endgame for denuclearization, the necessary precondition for achieving it, is unification. We will never achieve a verifiable and irreversible end to the North's nuclear menace until we have a reunified peninsula, free and at peace.

Thus far, the United States has not been willing to state this officially and publicly. The reason is that previous South Korean governments seeking unconditional engagement with the North would have accused the United States of regime-change and meddling in inter-Korean affairs—and because it would have traversed the golden rule of negotiating with North Korea laid out by former Secretary of Defense Bill Perry: Deal with North Korea as it is and not as we wish it to be. But many of the old arguments against articulating U.S. support for unification have been overtaken by events. Japan fears a nuclear North Korea more than a democratically unified peninsula. After Kim's second nuclear test, China is coming to realize that its future on the peninsula, economically and politically, is with Seoul, while Pyongyang grows into an increasingly uncontrollable liability. And South

Korea for the first time agreed to put in the June 2009 U.S.-ROK summit statement that the objective of the alliance is “peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy.”

Moreover, the notion that a united Korea under a southern aegis would want to inherit North Korea’s decrepit nuclear weapons is misinformed and unrealistic. As the eighth largest economy in the world and an OECD member, South Korea would not risk international isolation to keep weapons of very dubious quality and usefulness. After all, they could make better ones if they really wanted them in the first place.

So how do we get to this outcome: denuclearization preceded by unification? The first step has already been taken. After much opposition from the liberal Roh Moo-hyun government in Seoul, the conservative Lee Myung-bak government came into office willing to discuss with the United States how to respond to potential instability scenarios in the North. Given concerns about the health of the “Dear Leader” and a quicker-than-expected leadership transition to one of his ill-equipped sons, having this discussion makes sense. The likelihood of implementing unification under duress grows with each passing day. It will not require the Pyongyang regime’s agreement or its suborning, but its collapse.

The next step is to broaden this discussion to include China. Such a conversation must happen below the radar screen, but it should be a genuine one aimed at addressing everyone’s perceived vulnerabilities if things crumble in Pyongyang. Presumably, the Chinese are concerned about securing their border against refugees; the South Koreans, about restoring domestic stability and providing humanitarian relief to the northern people; and the Americans, about disposal of the nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles located there. This division of roles is not necessarily a zero-sum game for the players. Indeed, if properly prepared, everyone can gain from reaching an understanding.

Critics of proceeding in such a fashion argue that China will pronounce the exercise a non-starter for fear of ratifying a situation in which U.S. forces will ultimately be stationed north of the 38th parallel. But the argument for

keeping U.S. troops in Korea with reunification will become weaker, not stronger, once the menace to the north is gone.

For those in the State Department, this endgame would not preclude the need for diplomacy. The Six-Party Talks (and it should be Six-Party, not just bilateral, in order to keep the regional consensus in place) still serve as a tool for managing the problem in the meantime, aiming at achieving interim agreements that cap and freeze the North’s programs. A frozen program, after all, is better than a runaway one. The counter-proliferation sanctions following from UN Security Council Resolution 1874 need to be kept in place for two reasons. First, they are part of the diplomacy, albeit a coercive diplomacy, that keeps the North at the table. Second, these sanctions are not bargaining chips to trade for incremental agreements; they are designed to prevent future proliferation. Though far from airtight, they are the best tools we have to contain the threat, and as long as one nuclear weapon remains in the North, they need to be maintained until the regime totters and falls. And after it does, diplomats will enjoy full employment for years: There will be lots to do to cement new and improved security and economic arrangements in Northeast Asia.

The Obama Administration is well-positioned to execute this plan precisely because it carries none of the baggage of the Bush Administration. If George W. Bush had even mentioned the word “unification” to other Six-Party leaders, he would have sent them running away in fear of a neocon conspiracy to effect regime change *à la* Iraq. (Contrary to the popular view, the Bush Administration never raised unification or regime change as a policy option, either within the Six-Party Talks or bilaterally.) Because of the North’s bad behavior and Obama’s early rhetoric extending an open hand to rogue regimes, his advantage is that he can talk about human rights abuses, sanctions and unification while being seen as responsible rather than radical. This advantage, however, may be fleeting. The United States should act: It should pronounce the “u” word, take the measure of the reaction, unpark U.S. policy on Korea, and set its sights on an outcome that qualifies as a genuine policy success. 🇺🇸