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Donald Gregg: Sit down with North Korea and negotiate a lasting peace

By Donald Gregg



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Washington: President Obama's recent Middle East trip showed what good things can result from thoughtful, direct presidential involvement. The president addressed young Israelis, reassured allies in the region and brokered an Israeli apology to Turkey for a deadly raid on a flotilla attempting to take supplies to Gaza.

The president should employ that same sort of diplomacy toward North Korea.

An increasingly dangerous confrontation is building between the United States and North Korea. The outrageous rhetoric pouring out of Pyongyang makes it difficult to do anything more than dismiss North Korea's leader, Kim Jong Un. But abandoning diplomacy would be extremely dangerous. The North Koreans are convinced that nuclear weapons are the only thing keeping them safe from a U.S. attack, and recent flights of nuclear-capable U.S. warplanes over the Korean peninsula only hardened that conviction.

As distasteful as it may seem, we need to talk directly with the North Koreans. They will not give up their nuclear weapons at this juncture, and for the United States to demand that they do so as a precondition for talks will only lead to greater tension, including the possibility of a military explosion. Would it not be better to negotiate a peace treaty?

The George W. Bush administration took the position that engagement with Pyongyang would reward bad behavior, and that seems to be the approach of the Obama administration, too. But though the North Koreans often sound like belligerent lunatics, there are certainly many reasons to engage, particularly on a peace treaty, an idea Kim Jong Un might well embrace.

I have been dealing with Korean issues for 40 years, since I arrived as the CIA's chief of station in Seoul. Later, from 1989 to 1993, I served as ambassador to South Korea. And time and again, I saw diplomacy work where confrontation would have failed.

In August 1973, U.S. Ambassador Philip Habib learned that opposition leader Kim Dae-jung had been kidnapped in Tokyo and was on a small boat about to be thrown into the sea. It was widely assumed (and later confirmed) that South Korea's intelligence service, the KCIA, was responsible. But Habib did not jump into his sedan and confront autocratic President Park Chung-hee with an accusation. Habib first wrote Park a letter, giving him time to construct a response that kept Kim alive and enabled Park to deflect responsibility for the kidnapping.

In December 1980, I witnessed close up a confrontation that failed. Kim Dae-jung had, at that point, been sentenced to death on trumped-up charges of treason. Outgoing President Jimmy Carter sent Defense Secretary Harold Brown and me to Seoul to confront South Korea's president, Chun Doo-hwan, on the matter. Our instructions were to tell him, essentially, to release Kim "or else."

This approach failed utterly, and Kim was on the verge of execution. The incoming Reagan administration, led by Richard V. Allen, was astute enough to offer Chun a visit to the White House to keep Kim alive. In order to see Reagan, Chun released Kim, who went on to become South Korea's president and receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Granted, these experiences were in South Korea, a place very different from its northern neighbor. But diplomacy works around the world. We can't simply order Kim Jong Un to abandon his nuclear ambitions. Dialogue is needed, and Obama should reach out to those who have negotiated successfully with North Korea to help craft an

approach.

Next month, South Korean President Park Geun-hye will visit Washington to meet with Obama. I was in Seoul in 1974 when a North Korean agent tried to kill her father, President Park Chung-hee, fired and missed, killing her mother instead. Still, Park Geun-hye visited Pyongyang in 2001 and met with then-President Kim Jong Il. When I congratulated her for doing so, her response was: "We must look to the future with hope, not to the past with bitterness."

Park calls her policy toward North Korea "trustpolitik," and she would undoubtedly be pleased to find thinking compatible with that policy in the White House, as would China's new president, Xi Jinping, who has already called Park, offering to help ease tension between the two Koreas.

The alternative to diplomacy is escalating conflict, and that would be a terrible mistake on the Korean peninsula. Negotiating a lasting peace is the only sensible approach.

Gregg, the U.S. ambassador to South Korea from 1989 to 1993, was CIA station chief in that country from 1973 to 1975. He served as national security adviser to Vice President George H.W. Bush from 1982 to 1988. He wrote this for the Los Angeles Times.

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