

Is Kim Jong Il Becoming a Dove?

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Kim Jong Il's late July 2002 diplomatic overtures to his adversaries in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul caught many observers by surprise. They are particularly startling in light of North Korea's past year of hostile rhetoric aimed primarily at his foremost adversaries: the United States, Japan and South Korea. Then too, there were the armed clashes with the South Korean navy and Japan's Naval Self Defense Forces. Hardly one month before Kim's late July conciliatory gestures, North Korean naval forces in June 2002 sank a South Korean naval vessel, killing several South Korean seamen. The immediate cause was the long running dispute between the two Koreas over the so-called "Northern Limit Line," the Seoul-based United Nations Command's unilateral extension into the West Sea of the Demilitarized Zone truce line that has divided the Korean Peninsula since the Korean War's suspension in 1953.

What is Kim Jong Il up to? Is he becoming a dove? In rapid succession, beginning July 24, Kim Jong Il's Foreign Ministry spokesman authoritatively:

- expressed regret to Seoul for the June clash in the West Sea and proposed working level talks to begin in August,
- confirmed that North Korea's foreign minister would meet his Japanese counterpart at the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and
- affirmed North Korea's willingness to host an official visitor from Washington.

North Korea's official and public expression of regret to Seoul over the June 2002 incident in the West Sea has left many knowledgeable Pyongyang watchers guessing. Pyongyang rarely, and only very reluctantly, makes such statements. The last time it did so was in December 1996. In September 1996, a North Korean submarine full of heavily armed commandoes was discovered entangled in fishing nets just off of South Korea's east coast. Most of the commandoes either committed suicide or were killed by their officers. The incident outraged South Koreans. The United States, to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula, engaged in intense and lengthy negotiations. Reluctantly, North Korea finally agreed to express publicly "regret" over the incident. This time after the June 2002 incident, however, North

Korea without any apparent prodding from anyone voluntarily came forth to express regret. Such a self initiated gesture is even rarer than a public expression of regret.

Given Pyongyang's long track record of hostility toward Seoul, Tokyo and Washington, it would be foolish to believe that Kim Jong Il has abruptly decided to become a nice guy. North Korea's profound economic problems, the virtual famine throughout Kim's domain, and the gradually eroding capability of its still potentially very destructive military forces make Kim's conduct always self serving. What is he looking for this time? Some argue he is trying to project a conciliatory posture toward Seoul in the hope it will replenish Pyongyang's depleted stock of food grain. Some could convincingly argue Kim's shift in attitude is designed to impress Moscow and Beijing. Others emphasize Kim's primary aim is to woo Washington to send a high level representative to Pyongyang - the sooner the better.

All these objectives seem credible. They are all consistent with Kim Jong Il's foremost, long term goal - regime survival.

Since coming to power, Kim's international conduct has vacillated between conciliatory diplomacy and armed hostility. Each year since 1995, North Korea has first committed an act of unexpected hostility toward either South Korea or Japan, and then soon after moved to use diplomacy to erase the negative consequences. For example, in April 1995, North Korea violated the Korean War Armistice by dispatching a force of heavily armed North Korean soldiers into the Joint Security Area of the Demilitarized Zone, arousing fear that Pyongyang was intent on fostering an armed clash. Then came the two submarine incidents, the first in September 1996 and the second the following year. At the end of August 1998, North Korea shocked and angered Japan by launching a ballistic missile over Honshu Island and then sent a spy boat into Japanese territorial waters. In 1999, North Korean naval forces confronted their South Korean counterparts in the West Sea. A few months later, South Korea's President was in Pyongyang embracing his North Korean counterpart. Soon after, their relationship deteriorated and has never recovered fully.

Kim Jong Il's strategy for survival resembles shopping. Each time his shopping cart is empty, he first sanctions an act of hostility by his military forces. This immediately captures the international community's attention. His adversaries react first with fear, then condemnation, but ultimately with desires for reconciliation. Kim responds similarly to international outrage with heated rhetoric

that reassures Pyongyang's "hardliners" that he will be tough on the "foreign imperialists." Then he gradually softens his stance. Ultimately he wins "inducements" for one or more sectors of the international community in exchange for promises to forego future hostile actions. Each episode yield's North Korea a cart full of "inducements."

Kim's vacillation has paid off handsomely. Since 1994, his shopping cart has rarely been empty. Seoul, Washington, Tokyo, Moscow and Beijing, working at first separately, have supplied North Korea much of its needs. As coordination between Washington, Seoul and Tokyo has increased, Pyongyang has increasingly shifted its focus to Beijing, Moscow, and, since 1999, the members of regional economic associations like the European Union and ASEAN.

Beginning in 1994, Kim Jong Il has pulled his tiny domain back from the edge of famine and bankruptcy with inducements from the international community. In 1994, the United States pledged to build two nuclear reactors worth more than \$4 billion dollars, and to supply 500,000 metric tons of heavy fuel oil annually (3.5 million tons since 1994) to generate electricity. The international community followed with a steady supply of food aid that amounted to more than 500,000 metric tons by 2001. The international community complemented this food aid with medical supplies, agricultural inputs and machinery, educational exchanges. Despite their still troubled relationship, South Korea's economic engagement of North Korea continues to increase. North-South Korea trade and the value of their joint ventures has steadily increased since 1990, totally more than \$500,000,000 in 2000. The 1999 Kungang Mountains tourism deal earns Pyongyang \$90,000,000 annually in hard currency U.S. dollars. China since 1996 annually has supplied North Korea 500,000 tons of food grain, 1.2 million tons of crude oil, and 1.5 million tons of coal.

So while conservatives in Washington continue to describe North Korea as a "failed economy," Kim Jong Il quietly persists in revitalizing his economy using international aid. Prolonging Kim's despotic regime - is this in our best interest? Would it not be better to bring down Kim Jong Il's regime by denying him all aid?

For fifty years, since the Korean War of 1950-53, the international community attempted to change North Korea's behavior through diplomatic and economic isolation. The effort failed obviously. North Korea neither disappeared

nor changed its behavior. Moscow and Beijing sustained Pyongyang during that half century of estrangement from the broader international community. Beginning in 1990, Pyongyang sought to reduce its dependence on its former benefactors and expand its commercial and diplomatic ties. Kim Il Sung's initial efforts, aimed first at Japan, then South Korea and the United States, failed, largely because of North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Generally speaking, Kim Jong Il has been more successful than his father in this regard. Signing the Agreed Framework with the United States was an important first step because it suggested Pyongyang was finally ready to begin respecting the rules of international diplomacy. North Korea today cannot again be isolated as the United States and South Korea tried after the Korean War. The world has changed, and so too has North Korea. Pyongyang is a member of the United Nations. It has diplomatic ties with most members of ASEAN and the European Union. No longer is it heavily dependent on Moscow and Beijing for aid. South Korea, moreover, is increasingly a benefactor, less a rival. Only the United States and Japan maintain significant economic sanctions on North Korea. The most effective ones deny North Korea membership in the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF). These sanctions can limit North Korea's economic options, but they cannot undermine its economy given the diversity of the sources of its foreign aid.

Using military force to bring down Kim Jong Il's regime would only compound our problems. As the Bush Administration is learning concerning its hopes to end the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq, the world community does not eagerly embrace, and is not likely to support, the use of force to end a regime in the "axis of evil." In North Korea's case, an effort to overthrow Kim Jong Il would

surely result in a war. Given Japan's role as the United States' foremost logistics base in Northeast Asia, Japan's main islands would very likely become the target of North Korea's ballistic missiles.

There is a better way to achieve our goal of taming North Korea. We need to do a better job of ensuring Kim makes appropriate payment for the aid he receives. He still needs to understand that one must earn diplomatic respect and economic benefit by embracing international norms of behavior, not by first threatening peace with hostile outbursts followed by conciliatory gestures. The international community would do well to convene a conference to explore a comprehensive plan for economic cooperation with North Korea. This would preclude Kim from playing one aid donor against another while helping to ensure the aid would be invested in

converting North Korea's economy from an inward oriented, military dominated one into an economy redirected toward producing the goods North Korea needs to sell in the world market to pay for the food and other necessities it now obtains in the form of aid.

We also need to recognize that Pyongyang, like Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, has its hard liners. Most appear to be members of Pyongyang's "old guard," the elderly, high ranking military and party officials who faithfully served Kim Il Sung. As the "younger" Kim, Kim Jong Il must demonstrate respect for this "old guard," and occasionally permit them to voice their concerns and views about how best to deal with the foreign "imperialists." Politically, this is a wise path for one whose sole claim to power is his genetic link to the nation's founder. Excluding the "old guard" from his inner council, or ignoring them entirely, could convert some into foes. Regime survival - his primary goal - would be subverted. For Kim, it is better to maintain a solid support base at home while dealing with his formidable foreign adversaries. Occasionally allowing Pyongyang's old guard to lash out at the foreign "imperialists" also reminds their counterparts, the "hard liners" in Washington and elsewhere, that Pyongyang can match their rhetoric and remind them of the price a military confrontation would extract from both sides.

Since consolidating his power, Kim Jong Il has gradually shifted Pyongyang's foreign policy from its traditional reliance on coercive rhetoric, occasional acts of terrorism and armed clashes. He learned from his father, and

seems to be convincing his old guard through his deeds and the benefits they reap for his regime, that engagement of the international community, rather than estrangement and isolation from it, and negotiation rather than confrontation will eventually win the regime all it needs for survival. Progress in this regard has been very gradual since 1994, but the trend clearly has been toward engaging the international community and cautiously adapting its rules of conduct. North Korea has not engaged in acts of international terrorism since 1987. Since 1994, it has halted its nuclear weapons development program and increased the transparency of its nuclear program. Since 1999, it has unilaterally suspended the testing of its longer range ballistic missiles. Hesitantly, but increasingly, as evidenced by Kim submit with President Kim Dae-jung, Kim Jong Il it has sought to resolve differences through dialogue and negotiation rather than confrontation and armed clashes.

Obviously, there is still much room for improvement in North Korea's conduct. Its military still relies too extensively on infiltration of its neighbor's

territory, both the territorial waters of Japan and South Korea. It has yet to satisfy the International Atomic Energy Agency's requirements regarding nuclear transparency, it continues to export missiles to unstable areas of the world, and respect for human rights simply does not exist in North Korea.

But North Korea, like the other nations once loyal to the Soviet Union, is a nation in transition. Domestically, the transition of power continues from Kim Il Sung's fast passing away "old guard" to the new, younger advisers who surrounding Kim Jong Il. North Korea's foreign policy is also in a state of transition from reliance on coercive diplomacy, terrorism and military might toward embracing the international community and its preference for negotiation and reconciliation to promote national interests. Most recently, we have seen clear evidence that North Korea's economy is also in transition, a process that appears destined to convert it from an economy totally tied to and dependent upon assistance and markets in the former, but now collapsed "communist bloc." Foreign investors, hesitantly to be certain, but in increasing numbers, especially from China and South Korea, are converting North Korea into an outward oriented economy increasingly dependent on light industrial production and tourism for income. In one brief decade, North Korea has entered the United Nations, established diplomatic relations with most European Union and ASEAN members, and remains engaged in sputtering diplomatic engagement with Washington, Seoul and Tokyo. Many old problems remain, but fortunately, North Korea is accepting new ways to resolve them.

Why all these diplomatic overtures to his three adversaries on the eve of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF)? Pyongyang wants membership in the Asian Development Bank (ADB) so it can qualify for loans to revitalize its economy. Japan and the United States oppose this. Seoul already has voiced its support for North Korea's admission. Expressing regret to Seoul over the West Sea incident is a small price to pay for Seoul's continued support in this regard. Resuming dialogue with Washington, and addressing its concerns about terrorism could reduce its opposition to North Korea's entry into the ADB. ASEAN support for admission would certainly help. With Seoul, ASEAN and Washington leaning toward ADB admission for Pyongyang, Pyongyang probably hopes Tokyo might reconsider its present rigid stance. In this regard, it is Pyongyang, not Tokyo, which must change by responding concretely to Japan's concerns about the abducted citizens.

No, Kim Jong Il is not becoming a dove, but he seems to be learning the rules of international diplomacy. He still has much to learn, but the process has begun.