

Is Kim Jong Il Becoming a Dove?

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For

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Kim Jong Il's recent diplomatic overtures to his adversaries in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul caught my observers by surprise. 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.

Most surprising to many was the public expression of regret to Seoul. Together, these three conciliatory overtures seem to contradict North Korea's armed confrontation with South Korea in the West Sea in June.

What kind of game is Kim Jong Il playing? Some argue he is trying to be nice in the hope of convincing Seoul to replenish Pyongyang's depleted stock of food grain. Others emphasize Kim's efforts aim to woo Washington to send a high level representative to Pyongyang - the sooner the better. Both objectives seem credible, but when dealing with North Korea and Kim Jong Il, it is always best to look beyond the obvious. Kim probably has much more and longer term objectives in mind.

Kim Jong Il's foremost goal is the survival of his regime. To succeed, he needs both diplomatic respect and economic aid. His problem is how to induce the international community to give him these things, but at the same time avoid appearing too anxious both to his domestic advisers and foreign adversaries, while also not weakening North Korea's armed deterrence capability. Kim Jong Il increasingly seems to understand that armed confrontation and conventional coercive diplomacy no longer will promote North Korea's national interests. Since consolidating his power in 1995, he appears to have gently but persistently nudged his ranking military officials toward this conclusion.

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 to 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 previously 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, Tokyo might have to reconsider its present rigid stance.

No, Kim Jong Il is not becoming a dove, but he seems to be learning the game of international diplomacy.