ON A U.S. PRESIDENT MEETING KIM JONG UN: THE IMPORTANCE OF SENIOR-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT

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The Republican Party presidential candidate was criticized this past spring for repeatedly saying that if elected he would be willing to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. While this became ample fodder for news broadcasts and social media, one should not disparage the value of direct contact and negotiation with the top leader of North Korea. Unlike other countries, in North Korea if the top leader makes a strategic decision in a public manner, then the lower echelons of leadership must fall into line.

We should remember that former President Jimmy Carter met Kim Il Sung in 1994 in the conviction that it would be a mistake for the U.S. not to negotiate with the main leader of an adversarial and despised nation who alone could resolve a serious issue. Although Carter went to Pyongyang as a private citizen, North Korea's founder Kim Il Sung received him almost as if he were the sitting president. Also, President Bill Clinton wanted to go to Pyongyang before the end of his term in January 2001 (and after meeting Vice Marshal Jo Myong-rok, the North's number two, in the White House in October 2000) but was unable to because of 36 days of uncertainty as to the winner of the 2000 presidential election and due to the fact the U.S. had not successfully concluded negotiations on a missile agreement with the North.

As a former president, Clinton finally met Kim Jong Il in August 2009 in the process of retrieving two American journalists detained by the North. When he then reported to President Obama about his recent trip to the North in the Situation Room in the White House, it was about as close as the Obama administration got to senior-level negotiation with the North.

Otherwise, there have been nearly eight years of "strategic patience." There were some Track II dialogues; a few well-known North Korea experts spent extended time in Pyongyang; and yes, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper went to Pyongyang in November 2014 to retrieve two more American detainees—but nothing like from mid-2005 when Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill at least had ongoing dialogue with his mid-level counterparts from the North.

Of course, government-to-government contact on the bureaucratic level is vital and necessary. But probably more than any other country, North Korea's regime dynamics do not work like the rest of the world. North Korea is a country run as a family dynasty. When Kim Jong Un publicly makes a major decision, there can be no outward dissent among the elite. Bureaucratic politics are always present in North Korea, but a strategic decision made by the top leader is not subject to challenge by his subordinates.

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After the Seventh Korean Workers Party Congress held in May 2016, Kim Jong Un is more secure than ever in his leadership. This is a very good argument for senior-level engagement by the Obama administration or the next administration, whether Republican or Democratic.

In 2005, after the September 19th Joint Statement, my colleagues in Washington articulated three main principles that should undergird American efforts to engage and negotiate with North Korea. These principles were based on significant contact with senior North Korean officials since the early 1990s. While that was 11 years ago, and it can be argued much has changed since then, these principles seem no less relevant today than they were a decade ago. I have adapted them below:

1. North Korea insists that for its society's political culture, senior-level engagement is first needed to resolve the nuclear issue. Through meetings between the top DPRK leader and a senior U.S. leader (i.e., the President

or his/her authorized senior representative like the Secretary of State), a relationship can be made and general agreement reached. Detailed talks at lower levels can then proceed based on the framework established at the top. When the necessary trust is established with the top leader himself and he publicly gives his word, then, in DPRK political culture, he must fulfill what he promised because his word signifies the utmost commitment to his people, which he cannot break. The U.S., to be successful, must obtain his personal assurance.

North Korean denuclearization requires a firm guarantee of DPRK security. Without such a guarantee, the DPRK feels it is being asked to strip naked and be defenseless. To them, nuclear weapons are foremost a means of guaranteeing the nation's security. But an alternative, minimal security guarantee can also come, they believe, through converting an enemy into a friend. Friendship, such as the establishment of normal relations, between the two countries, can be secured through engagement of the senior leadership. U.S. diplomats, in international relations, represent the authority of the nation's senior leadership, but this is not well-accepted in North Korea's unique political culture.

The U.S. should not simply reward North Korea. But due to its regime structure, North Korea's ability to comply in strategic matters is paralyzed without prior senior-level engagement. Because of differences in political culture and dynamics, future progress with the DPRK is likely to be impeded, where North Korea may either boycott future talks or its negotiators will over-demonstrate regime loyalty by making endless demands, appealing to hardline military elements in their leadership.

Engaging the North on a senior level also separates the DPRK top leader from objecting hardliners, providing him maneuvering room to undertake a more practical direction rather than prolong ideological confrontation. While no senior representative of the United States should journey to Pyongyang to be exploited by the North, there are innovative ways senior-level engagement can be accomplished with minimal risk.

2. The U.S. should adopt a policy of equally embracing both Koreas. China has relations with each Korea. The U.S. should also have normal relations and influence with both Koreas. South Korea, the American alliance partner since 1954, already somewhat distanced itself from the U.S. in recent years;

it can happen again. Normalizing American relations with North Korea will in fact help prevent the North from achieving its ambition of overrunning or causing upheaval in the South. U.S. help in the improvement of North Korea's overall position can also serve to improve North Korean human rights. It is in the U.S. interest to recognize an outstretched hand, if and when offered, and grasp it while holding onto the ROK's as well.

The U.S. should promote change through participation and engagement, rather than confrontation and punishment, for the survival of the Korean peninsula. Otherwise, the U.S. can lose influence in the entire Korean peninsula. There should be no second Korean War or a Finlandization of North Korea by China. These principles should undergird U.S. policy.

3. To deal effectively with North Korea, the United States must prioritize its issues in addressing them to the North. It should not at the same time pressure North Korea on denuclearization, its illegal activities and human rights violations—even though they are each discrete issues—because simultaneous demands cause them to overreact and perceive these as possible signals of steps toward war. By making multiple demands at the same time, they panic that the overwhelming pressures are intended to cause their system to collapse. The DPRK then digs in its heels and becomes belligerent. Instead, the U.S. should first resolve the nuclear issue. Then it can more effectively and naturally deal with the vital issues of human rights and criminal activities.

North Korea requires an approach of firmness and discipline, coupled with fairness, rather than disengagement and confrontation. No matter how rightly motivated, a policy of confrontation risks pushing North Korea to the brink, with potential destruction to the entire Korean peninsula as the unintended consequence. Sanctions against the DPRK as implemented by the United Nations Security Council, no matter how tough, are a tool, not a strategy, for dealing with North Korea.