

John Delury and The Asia Society China Task Force on How To Engage

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China has insisted, is insisting and will continue to insist that sanctions alone will not solve the North Korean problem. Some initiative from the US is required. But what should it look like? In this installment of our Advice Column for the Trump administration, I consider two proposals: one from John Delury targeting North Korea itself; the second a task force headed by Orville Schell and Susan Shirk that focuses on the China angle. Both offer strategies of engagement.

The title of John Delury's "Trump and North Korea: Reviving the Art of the Deal" at Foreign Affairs certainly plays to the president's negotiating sensibilities. It also rests on presumptions that are common to those favoring engagement: that time is not on our side; that escalation won't work; that North Korea is simply looking for security and that Kim Jong Un is ready to deal. Perhaps the most controversial presumption is that Kim Jong Un wants to focus greater attention on the economy and—Delury assumes—less on the nuclear and missile programs. As he puts it, "North Korea's leader will put the economy first—and open up the country in the way this would require—only if and when he starts feeling confident that he has secured his position at home and neutralized the threats from abroad."

Delury proposes a three-phased pathway that could even lead to a Kim-Trump summit: "Back channel" talks would be the starting point (unfortunately, as we saw last week, the Trump State Department seems skittish about even permitting these talks to go forward in track two form);

If these talks make progress, then an envoy could go to Pyongyang—perhaps to negotiate the release of the two detained Americans—and also negotiate a freeze. The freeze would "halt further development of [North Korea's] nuclear and long-range ballistic missile programs and allow International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors back into the country to verify compliance." North Korea's insistence on its right to launch "satellites" would be handled by outsourcing their launches to the Russians.

The freeze would provide the opening for high-level talks and a possible summit.

To purchase the freeze—the crucial first step—Delury says that Trump

should go “far beyond” the food aid on offer in the Leap Day deal of 2012: scaling back or canceling military exercises; convening Four Party talks on a peace regime; and even loosening sanctions “in step with Kim’s initial freeze and subsequent moves.” The last is crucial to Delury’s liberal vision, since it is the step that will demonstrate the material gains to North Korea from closer integration with the region.

The problems and risks are well-known, but I will only cite the more obvious ones. A freeze opens the president to the classic extortion charge—that the US is paying the North Koreans to stop their illegal behavior—with little guarantee that you can get from the first step to any subsequent ones. What makes Delury believe that the freeze would in fact generate further moves by North Korea when the regime could reap the benefit of endless delay getting to anything difficult? Lifting sanctions also is not just a bilateral issue but a complex multilateral one.

But to me, the most problematic hope is that Kim Jong Un believes that he has to make the grand strategic choice that Delury presumes he does. Why? Maybe the coal ban will change the regime’s mind, but absent pressure I have seen precious little to suggest that Kim Jong Un is anxious to trade his nuclear weapons for what Delury puts on offer, however generous. The core presumption of the byungjin line is that “we can have it all.” Why budge?

The possible flaws don’t actually preclude trying something Delury-like, and particularly the early step of actually holding “no preconditions” talks (also suggested by Ottar and Steve Andreasen at 38North).

It was disheartening to see that the State Department was unwilling to take even the vanishingly small risk of allowing track two talks to go forward; let’s hope they change their mind once the policy review is in place. At least we would have more information on what the North Koreans are thinking. The last trial balloon they floated back in July was completely ignored, as Bob Carlin points out at 38North.

The Asia Society task force, co-chaired by my colleague Susan Shirk, is the first such high-level task force to address US-China relations in the Trump era. The core insight of the report—and one that I share—is that North Korea is not just a problem in its own right but both a challenge and opportunity for US-China relations. As the report puts it, “if China and the United States were able to collaborate more closely in addressing this threat, then they would not only alleviate a dangerous common threat but also reinforce mutual confidence in each other’s long-term strategic goals and help lay the groundwork to promote cooperation in other pressing security and economic issues.” The report also has more appreciation of the granularity of negotiations: the significance of getting the sequence exactly right.

The strategic approach is one that combines sanctions and inducements: buy greater Chinese cooperation on sanctions—a gesture China has already made—with the following:

“Offering Pyongyang an omnibus package deal including negotiations—among the four (United States, China, North Korea, and South Korea) or six (including Japan and Russia) relevant parties—of a peace treaty to replace the Korean War armistice and steps toward establishing diplomatic relations between the United States and North Korea. In return, however, North Korea would have to be willing to implement a verifiable freeze of its nuclear and missile programs, including no further nuclear tests or missile launches and to pledge (echoing the Joint Statement of 2005) to denuclearize the entire Korean peninsula.”

This last point is subtly different from Delury in requiring at least a commitment to denuclearization as a goal of the negotiations and some simultaneity in negotiations on the nuclear and peace regime/normalization front. The report suggests that “steps” toward the peace treaty and normalization could begin along with the freeze, but notes explicitly—again unlike Delury—that these steps would be halted if there were not simultaneous progress on denuclearization. Only when such progress was forthcoming would we get to sanctions relief, inverting Delury who is willing to lead with such relief.

What I particularly like about the Asia Society report is some of its procedural suggestions, such as a high-level envoy not to North Korea but to China and close attention to the risks vis-à-vis the South by proposing a US-South Korea-China dialogue. Such a dialogue would seek to choke off the ability of North Korea to drive wedges between China, the US and South Korea and between South Korea and the US. And if the process described does not succeed, the report suggests a return to the idea of five-party talks with an empty chair for North Korea that would permit coordination.

What are the chances? Trump opened up possible US-China cooperation on the DPRK by reiterating the one China policy. The Tillerson-Wang Yi meeting probably communicated China's plan to take the coal action to ramp up pressure. Trump made nice noises about his conversations with Xi Jinping in his Reuters interview last week. But from Beijing's perspective, the next move definitely falls to the US. If the US does not pick this up, the Trump administration better have something superior in its hip pocket.

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