

No treaty, no N. Korean denuclearization

By Spencer H. Kim

As a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, I have read and heard from many foreign policy experts.

As a co-founder of the Pacific Century Institute, which has funded many projects related to "building bridges of understanding" with North Korea over 30 years, I have talked to many North Korean officials, economic planners and even military officers, both in the U.S. and on my many trips to North Korea, some of which included travel outside Pyongyang.



I spent a year at Harvard as a resident fellow studying North-South issues and learning from the bright brains assembled there.

I have boiled what I have learned down to three incisive quotes from three very incisive men that, together, cut to the heart of the North Korean nuclear issue.

In a Q&A after receiving the Pacific Century Institute's "Building Bridges Award" in 2020, Dr. Siegfried Hecker, the leading expert on North Korea's nuclear program, was asked, "Will Kim Jong-un give up his nuclear weapons?"

He answered, "I don't know, and I don't think Kim Jong-un knows. It will depend on if the ROK and U.S. give him an offer that he thinks will be better for him than keeping his nuclear weapons."

Former Secretary of Defense William Perry summed up his famous review of U.S. policy toward North Korea in 2000 by saying, "We have to deal with North Korea as it is, not as we want it to be." And, he added, the most important goal for Kim is regime survival.

There is no such thing as a double superlative. Only one thing can be most important. If what is good for the Kim regime is what is most important, the idea that North Korea will never give up

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completely, we promise we will give you all the economic assistance you need and you can trade freely with the world and we will never, ever sanction you again, for example, for human rights violations. And we promise new presidents elected in the U.S. or ROK will never, ever change this policy, and would never, ever think of attacking or threatening you militarily."

On the other hand, international, U.S. and ROK sanctions tie Kim's hands and make China his only effective economic partner. The overbearing, bossy China that would love to make its Korean buffer state a tributary de facto province. (See not only the fraught history of China-Korea relations but the Hu Jintao/Jang Song-thaek/Zhou Yongkang/Kim Yong-nam saga). As the saying goes, when the door is open, the North curses the U.S., but when it is closed, it curses China.

Is the ROK the benevolent big brother, the solution? Twice as big population-wise, 70 times the GDP, vibrant democracy, free speech, cosmopolitan, alluring culture — perhaps for a little sunshine, but get too close and get burned. In a meeting in Pyongyang in 2014 discussing North Korea's long-range economic plan, I asked a high-ranking official what his most pressing need was.

He replied, "English language training for our economic development cadre." The long-range wish/plan is not China or South Korea, but the broad world as a balancer to the two all-too-close neighbors.

Enter the third gentleman, Dwight Eisenhower, and his famous quote: "Whenever I run into a problem I can't solve, I always make it bigger. I can never solve it by trying to make it smaller, but if I make it big enough, I can begin to see the outlines of a solution."

My year at Harvard led me to the conclusion there was no untying bit by bit of the Gordian knot that is the North Korean nuclear issue. Only a powerful stroke that cuts all the tangled strands has a chance.

A treaty, entered into by the U.S., both Koreas, China, Japan and maybe Russia, with a step by step, time-phased internationally verified denuclearization may persuade Kim Jong-un the process can be trusted if he has received removal of sanctions and a build-up and diversification of his economy has taken place as the weapons are drawn down.

And the treaty has security guarantees from all the parties, paired with meaningful confidence-building measures. Coincidentally, the daily life of the average North Korean would probably be more enhanced than it would ever be by a human rights pressure campaign.

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engendered by China's rise and the U.S./allied search for a response, is that a bad thing? Is Dwight right?

Does expansion of the North Korean nuclear issue not only bring into focus the outlines of a solution to that problem, but can it also be less of an intractable headache, and more of the convening catalyst to address a much bigger issue?

I think it is possible Kim could be persuaded. Especially if any military/security and economic development institutions created by the treaty are sited in the North.

Spencer H. Kim is CEO of CBOL Corp., a California aerospace company. He is a co-founder of the Pacific Century Institute and a member of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations. He was appointed by President Bush to represent the U.S. on the APEC Business Advisory Council for 2006-08. He was a resident fellow at Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation in 2012-13.