What will it take for a normalization of relations between the U.S. and North Korea?

Five American experts talk about the prospects of a landmark deal between Washington and Pyongyang

Chad O'Carroll, September 28th, 2015

From the outset of his presidential campaign, President Obama made clear he would pursue a different form of diplomatic strategy with countries that had traditionally been regarded as foes of Washington: He was willing to negotiate with them “without preconditions.” And coming after the “axis of evil” years of the George W. Bush administration, that gave hope in some circles that a breakthrough could finally be on the cards between Pyongyang and Washington under Obama’s watch.

But all was not to be: within months of his inauguration, North Korea launched a Taepodong-2 long-range rocket and less than two months later – following sharp criticism from the UN Security Council – conducted its second ever nuclear test. And so the scene was set for the next several years of policy with Pyongyang, worsened further by the Leap Year deal of 2012 falling apart just weeks after its agreement.

Yet fast-forward to 2015 and it appears evident, on the surface at least, that Obama was serious when he talked about negotiating with Washington’s traditional foes.
First it was Myanmar, then Cuba – then finally a breakthrough nuclear deal with Iran. But what about North Korea? Veering towards another satellite launch this September and with strong potential of a follow-up nuclear test – as was the pattern in 2009 and 2013 – it appears almost impossible to imagine how a normalization of relations could occur anytime soon between the U.S. and North Korea. Yet could there be a way?

In part one of a major new NK News expert interview series, four American North Korea watchers – alongside a rising young voice – shared their thoughts about what it might take to see a major improvement in relations with North Korea. And while there were some disagreements about exactly how things have got to the point they are now, there was striking accord amongst all participants on the impression that unlike with Cuba, Myanmar and Iran, North Korea is simply not interested in improving relations with its long-time foe.

Experts from the American panel of respondents include:

- **Bruce Klingner**, Senior Research Fellow, Northeast Asia Asian Studies Center, Heritage Foundation
- **Darcie Draudt**, Non-Resident James A. Kelly Fellow, Pacific Forum CSIS and Doctoral Candidate, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Political Science
- **David Straub**, Associate Director of the Korea Program, Stanford University
- **Dr. Nicholas Eberstadt**, Henry Wendt Scholar in Political Economy, American Enterprise Institute
- **Dr. Stephan Haggard**, Lawrence and Sallye Krause Professor of Korea-Pacific Studies; director, Korea-Pacific Program; and Distinguished Professor of Political Science at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at UC San Diego.

Anti-U.S. propaganda is commonplace in North Korea | Picture: E. Lafforgue

Q1) Relations with Iran, Myanmar and Cuba are all significantly improving under the Obama
administration. What will it take for a similar breakthrough with North Korea?

As a candidate, Mr. Obama took a significant political risk by making clear publicly that as president he would be prepared to engage in diplomacy with “rogue states” if they were willing to deal on reasonable terms. He kept his word and improved relations with Libya, Iran, Myanmar, and Cuba. Leaders in those countries, each for different reasons, engaged in genuine negotiations with the United States.

North Korea’s leadership has not been willing to do so. The evidence is clear. Kim Jong Il greeted President Obama’s inauguration with further nuclear and missile tests. When Kim Jong Il was succeeded by his son Kim Jong Un, the Obama administration concluded the so-called Leap Day deal freezing North Korea’s missile launches, an agreement that Pyongyang promptly and blatantly violated.

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North Korea today is not prepared to engage in genuine negotiations about ending its nuclear weapons programs; indeed, its leaders and diplomats have repeatedly stated that they have no intention of negotiating about that at all. Until North Korea changes this attitude, there will be no prospect of achieving a negotiated end to its nuclear and missile programs and thus of fundamentally improving the security situation on the peninsula through diplomacy.

The international nuclear agreement with Iran generated some speculation about the potential for Washington to resurrect similar negotiations with North Korea. Indeed, the Obama administration’s dramatic shifts in policy toward Burma, Cuba, and now Iran might suggest
an analogous gesture toward Pyongyang. But, a number of factors mitigate against the U.S. initiating a similar outreach with North Korea.

From a domestic U.S. political point of view, the clock is running out for the Obama administration. With only a year and a half left, Obama has insufficient time to bring a complicated and contentious North Korean accord to completion. Moreover, after the failure of its 2009 and 2012 attempts, the Obama Administration is not inclined toward a third attempt at engagement with Pyongyang.

The biggest obstacle to any potential nuclear agreement with North Korea is, of course, North Korea itself. But the biggest obstacle to any potential nuclear agreement with North Korea is, of course, North Korea itself. Pyongyang’s unceasing threats of nuclear annihilation against the United States and its allies, as well as cyber attacks and pledge of a “9/11-type attack,” do not create an atmosphere conducive to diplomatic engagement.

Not that there was any doubt, but North Korea publicly rejected any inclination to follow Iran into denuclearization negotiations with the United States. That statement is consistent with years of regime declarations that the Six-Party Talks were “null and void” while dismissing any possibility of it living up to numerous previous pledges to denuclearize.

A breakthrough will take some interest on the North Korean government’s part in improved relations with the U.S. When President Obama came to office, he was interested in improving relations with all those countries, including DPRK. But the Obama White House came quickly to the conclusion that Pyongyang has no interest in what Washington meant by “improved relations.”

One can look at diplomatic history to get a sense of what North Korea would like from a better relationship with the United States. In fact, I think General Cho Myong Nok more or less spelt it out during his visit in October of 2000 to the USA. His opening bid suggested something like U.S. acquiescence in a reunification of the Korean Peninsula on North Korean terms, and U.S. acquiescence in North Korean nuclear weapons development. President Obama may be viewed as a pioneer in foreign policy in some circles, but I don’t think he’s quite that much of a pioneer.
The high-profile progress in relations with countries like Iran, Myanmar, and Cuba naturally lead eyes toward North Korea as a potential next goal. In order for similar progress to be made, the DPRK leadership must be willing to talk to the outside world in a more regular manner. North Korea under Kim Jong Un has very noticeably shied from working with other states, including its longtime partners China and Russia.

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For their part, the United States and South Korea have both signaled to North Korea their willingness to get back to the discussion table on issues that limit North Korea’s activity in the global sphere, including not only its human rights records and its nuclear weapons program but also other illicit activities including counterfeiting operations, narcotics and labor trafficking, and illegal sale of weapons or fissile materials. Addressing these issues is the baseline for North Korea being permitted greater access to the foreign markets it seeks worldwide, not just with the United States. And because of the close alliance relationship with South Korea, Washington has a special interest in the future of North Korea’s relations with Seoul as well.

On this point, the “August Crisis” on the Korean Peninsula ended, as the time of this interview, in a manner uncharacteristic for Kim Jong Un’s track record: in a grueling, multi-day session of bilateral talks with an expression of regret for an alleged mine planted by North Korea and drawing back increased military postures on both sides. Improved inter-Korean relations are helpful for any improvement in U.S.-North Korean relations; Washington has expressly stated that its route to a safer Korean Peninsula is through Seoul.

Despite having foreign policies that were historically at odds with the United States, the four cases are in fact quite different. With respect to Myanmar and Cuba, the U.S. faced no security challenges. The changed Cuba policy was allowed by shifting winds in
American politics and the manifest failure of the longstanding embargo. Domestic political changes in Cuba also mattered, including the gradual leadership succession not only from Fidel but from Raul as well. In Myanmar, domestic political changes also provided the opportunity for an opening. Iran was a near-breakout state that also saw a quite significant domestic political shift with the election of Rouhani and dramatic economic deterioration resulting from sanctions.

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In North Korea there is little sign of a domestic political shift and the regime has already broken out. Sanctions have proven ineffective because of the willingness of China to sustain the regime. Negotiations are unlikely until North Korea shows a willingness to put its nuclear weapons on the table. Since 2008, there has been little expressed interest in doing so.

Main picture: NK News

Featured Image: US welcomed! Propaganda Poster in the street Pyongyang North Korea by Eric Lafforgue on 2008-09-08 14:38:09