Korea killer: Is risk of failure stymieing U.S. North Korea policy?

Most experts agree: Chances for success unlikely, chances for embarrassment quite high

Chad O'Carroll, September 29th, 2015

Nonproliferation and denuclearization policies toward North Korea have continuously failed since Pyongyang confirmed its nuclear intentions by threatening to leave the Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1993.

From the abandonment of the Agreed Framework in 2002 to Pyongyang's unilateral walk-out of the Six-Party Talks in 2009 to the disintegration of the “Leap Day deal” just weeks after its announcement, there have always been different justifications in the U.S. and DPRK for the dismal record of failure.

But whoever is really to blame, could this history actually now be preventing leaders in Washington from making new and creative efforts to resolve differences with Pyongyang? Put another way, if the risks of failure with Pyongyang appear now to outweigh the rewards, isn’t it better from the short-term perspective of American policymakers to simply sit it out and leave North Korea for the next administration to deal with?

While ignoring North Korea runs the risk of Pyongyang conducting further satellite launches and nuclear tests – events that clearly go against long-term U.S. interests in the region – could it be that those risks are easier to deal with than the embarrassment of a major policy initiative failure?
In part two of a major new NK News expert interview series, four prominent American North Korea watchers – alongside a rising new voice – shared their thoughts about the current policy situation regarding Korea. On the one hand, some indicated the past record and risk of failure may have a major impact in restricting new options for policymakers. On the other, one former State Department observer disputed the notion that President Obama wasn’t already making major efforts to deal with the problem. And yet others suggested there was little to be gained from further efforts.

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.

*President Barack Obama giving the State of the Union Address on January 20 | Picture: Wikimedia Commons*

Q2) Has Obama paid little attention to North during his presidency because the risks – such as North Korea disregarding its past agreements, bringing potential for embarrassment – outweigh the rewards?
That’s a very good question with a very complicated answer. One simplistic way to approach answering the question, however, is to look at leading decision-making personalities. To the extent that personnel is policy, we get some clues here.

In the first Obama term, the key point people on North Korea policy were Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Assistant Secretary Kurt Campbell. Both of those leaders, I may suggest, had paid a certain amount of attention to the career-ending extravaganza that befell Ambassador Chris Hill under the previous administration as a result of his attempt to engineer engagement with North Korea.

A great many people in foreign policy circles in Washington have learned now not to risk their own career futures on goodwill in Pyongyang, and certainly neither Kurt Campbell nor Hillary Clinton, who both may have had ideas for promotions after their most recent jobs, did so.

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In the current administration the point person on North Korea policy might be seen as Secretary (John) Kerry. He’s had, if we may say, bigger fish to fry over the past several years. If and when there is a final determination on the Iran deal, he may firm his sights to the problem of North Korea. But I won’t hold my breath waiting for that.

I vigorously dispute assertions that the Obama administration has paid little attention to North Korea and that it is too distracted, preoccupied, or “fatigued” by problems elsewhere to deal with Pyongyang. For President Obama personally, as well as his administration as a whole, North Korea is in the top rank of foreign policy and security concerns, and this is fully reflected in the amount of time and resources that the U.S. government is devoting to the North
Korea problem. North Korea presents serious challenges to U.S. interests, especially the defense of U.S. allies South Korea and Japan and the prevention of nuclear proliferation. The United States is also deeply concerned about the human rights and humanitarian situations in North Korea.

The Obama administration has, among many other things, increased its support of South Korea’s defense, bolstered security cooperation with Japan, cracked down on the North’s proliferation activities and arms sales, enhanced missile defense of the U.S. and its allies, added sanctions and highlighted Pyongyang’s abuse of its own people, all while keeping the door open to negotiations with North Korea whenever it is ready for genuine talks.

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Typically, what people really mean when they criticize the Obama administration for allegedly not paying attention to North Korea is that they don’t like the Obama administration’s policy. The critics either want the Obama administration to increase all sorts of pressure on North Korea or to resume nuclear and other negotiations with North Korea even if, as is the case, Pyongyang is not prepared to negotiate an end to its nuclear weapons programs. The former ignores the problematic aspects of too rapidly increasing pressures on North Korea, including the risks to South Korea, while the latter would be tantamount to accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state.

To be perfectly clear, resuming talks with North Korea when everyone knows it has no intention of negotiating seriously about giving up nuclear weapons would only encourage North Korea in its current misbehavior. In addition, the talks would inevitably soon fail. The United States would then be seen by the international community and especially its allies as having been naïve and incompetent, resulting in serious damage to the U.S. position and image not only vis-à-vis North Korea but also globally.

The Obama Administration entered office amidst high hopes that by extending an open hand of dialogue, and by not being George Bush, the U.S. could improve bilateral relations with North Korea and achieve a breakthrough in Six-Party Talks.

Yet Pyongyang quickly showed it would act just as badly to Obama as to Bush. On the eve of Obama’s inauguration, the North Korean Foreign Ministry – the supposed “softliners” touted by engagement advocates — was already listing new demands. Unclassified satellite imagery two days after Obama’s inauguration revealed preparations for the April 2009 long-range missile launch which was yet another North Korean violation of UN resolutions.
By mid-2009, Obama officials were stupefied that Pyongyang acted identically to them as to their predecessors. After criticizing the Bush Administration for an over-reliance on pressure tactics, the Obama Administration subsequently proclaimed that it had the toughest sanctions on North Korea in U.S. history.

The Obama Administration – concerned that Pyongyang would conduct another provocation if Washington wasn't talking with them – subsequently agreed to the Leap Day Agreement of February 2012. When North Korea announced two weeks later that it would violate the agreement and UN resolutions, the deal collapsed.

Since then, the Obama Administration has pursued a strategic patience policy – offering conditional dialogue while talking tough on sanctions – while appearing to wait for the clock to run out on its tenure.

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The decision by the Obama administration to ignore North Korea stems from the fact that there is little to be gained from opening talks on the core issues of interest to the United States.

These include not only the country’s nuclear and missile programs but the disposition of conventional forces and lower-level provocations as well.

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While it’s true that the Obama administration may, arguably, have scored some recent wins for its foreign policy record with Cuba and now possibly Iran, it would be wrong to give this administration the short shrift in its North Korea tack.

Many seem to forget the 2012 “Leap Day Agreement,” likely because of its rapid disintegration at the news of North Korea’s space launch (which the United States claims is banned by UN sanctions) just two weeks after the deal was announced, and a long-range missile test two months later.

The deal, which came not long after Kim Jong Un gained leadership following his father’s death, served to demonstrate that North Korea’s likelihood of backing out of such agreements are likely to continue under the new leader.

_Main picture: NK News_