

Kim Jong un and the Demonization of North Korea. A Distorted Mirror of Reality

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According to the late professor Sam Noumoff, the North Korean leader had requested Denis Rodman of the Basket Ball Team Harlem Globetrotters who was visiting North Korea to ask president Obama to contact him by telephone, with a view to reaching a peace agreement.

This article was published in May of 2013, two months before the 50 years commemoration of the 1953 armistice agreement which led to the end of the Korean war.

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Does the recent [2013] visit of Denis Rodman and members of the Basket Ball Team Harlem Globetrotters to North Korea raises the specter of normalization of DPRK-US relations?

Ping-Pong diplomacy was the normalization of relations between China and the US. Tragically, this is an unlikely parallel. Ping-Pong was known internationally as the premier Chinese sport, while basketball has never been associated with North Korea. More importantly the China-US rapprochement was always driven by the US wanting to take advantage of the Sino-Soviet dispute as part of its cold war strategy.

Following upon the Rodman visit, the US is in the process of re-launching its annual massive joint military exercise with South Korea, which the North has always seen as a preparatory run for the invasion of the North. In response the North has organized its own military exercises with all of the associated risks. On the US initiative the UN Security Council condemned the North's recent nuclear bomb test, imposing further sanctions, which in its turn resulted in the North threatening a missile attack on the US mainland and an abandonment of the 1953 Korean War ceasefire and cut the Red Cross hot line between North and South, while lines remain open, for the moment, between the military and aviation authorities. The UN has complicated the issue by asserting under Article V of the Armistice, that any amendment must be agreed to by both sides, and therefore cannot be unilaterally abrogated. A silly argument, as the North can simply not participate in any activity associated with the Armistice, such as the Military Armistice Commission which is charged with meeting daily, with no more than a seven day recess. The US could then charge the North with violating the agreement, but with what penalty? The North will counterclaim that Article IV has been violated which called for negotiation within three months of signing the Armistice for the withdrawal of foreign troops. The lawyers will have a field day shouting invective at each other.

Portrayal of the issue in the mainstream media runs something like this: The North provokes, the US imposes sanctions. The North responds with further provocation followed by a subsequent round of sanctions, *ad infinitum*. As it is generally agreed this cycle has

been without any effect, or likely to result in any change. The policy has failed abysmally. In order to project a change, one must go back some years.

Background

Korea was occupied by Japan after the 1895 war between Japan and China, integrated into Japan in 1910 and remained so until Japan's defeat in 1945. Korea was then divided into two zones, one occupied by the US and the other by the USSR. The Red Army retreated as per previous agreement, while the US remains with more than 28,000 troops in South Korea to this day. The northern zone became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in 1948. Initially the US installed a Korean resident of Hawaii, Syngman Rhee, as President of the Republic of Korea, who violently repressed the popularly supported people's committees that had emerged in the south in the face of the Japanese retreat. While the North saw a guerilla General who had been based on the Sino-Korean border, Kim Il Sung, rise to power. Two years later, in June war between the two Koreas formally began. One should say formally, as southern forces were engaged in coastal raids for some time prior to June. The Korean war devastated the entire country, with only one building standing in the northern capital when an armistice was signed in 1953. In the absence of a subsequent peace treaty, the DPRK and the US remain technically at war to this day.

From 1953 to 2013 the fundamental and primary objectives of the northern government has been

(1) the signing of a peace treaty with the US; and,

(2) normalization and a reparations agreement with Japan. Both of these normalization agreements are aimed at stabilization of the Korean peninsula and are viewed as precluding any strategy of regime change. North Korea for 60 years has remained under the nuclear threat by the US, and all of its attempts to address this threat are based on this threat perception. No country can tolerate six decades of threat to its survival without consequences, US verbiage to the contrary notwithstanding.

When Kim Jong un recently asked Denis Rodman to ask President Obama to phone him this was not meant lightly. The North has and will continue to try any means to begin negotiations for a peace treaty.

The US has consistently refused, arguing that this would reward the north for its bellicose behaviour, and consequently the cycle continues. In the late 1970's during an academic visit to the North, the Foreign Minister asked this writer to deliver a very courteous letter to Cyrus Vance, Jimmy Carter's Secretary of State, requesting peace treaty discussions. Six months passed before the State Department agreed to meet. At that meeting, Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary for East Asia, said 'we do not accept such messages... as he held out his hand to take the letter'. The sole result of this initiative was its publication the next month by the South Korean Unification Ministry.

US hostility is grounded in the assertion that North Koreans are duplicitous and will break their word. It is also grounded in the fact that the US military won every war since 1812 until the Koreans and their Chinese friends fought them to a draw. Here is a quotation from an Australian colleague, Gavin McCormack (<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&=30179>):

“Following bilateral talks in Beijing, on 29 February 2012, it reached a fresh bilateral agreement: North Korea would implement a moratorium on long-range missile launches, nuclear tests and nuclear activities and agree to the return of IAEA inspectors to verify and monitor its observance. In return the US would grant 240,000 metric tons of nutritional assistance, and it stated that it did not have any “hostile intent” and was prepared to take steps to improve the bilateral relationship in the “spirit of mutual respect for sovereignty and equality.” Those three words – respect, sovereignty, equality – were scarcely mentioned in media reports of the agreement, but to North Korea they were the essence, since the goal of its foreign policy for decades has been to accomplish “normalization” of relations with the US on such a basis, to secure the lifting of the sanctions under which it has labored for more than half a century and to transform the “temporary” 1953 ceasefire into a peace treaty.

In that 29 February Agreement, the US also reaffirmed its commitment to the 19 September 2005 Joint Statement. This apparently inconsequential sentence was profoundly significant, since that agreement addressed comprehensively the problems of the peninsula and mapped out a path to their resolution, by a graduated, step-by-step process leading to North Korean denuclearization in exchange for diplomatic and economic normalization. {1} In 2005, the US had declared it harboured no aggressive intent and all parties (i.e., US, South Korea, China, Russia and Japan) affirmed the principle of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, “respect” for the North Korean insistence on the right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy and agreement to discuss provision of a light water reactor to North Korea at an appropriate time. The agreement also included a Japanese commitment to take steps to normalize relations and of the directly related parties to “negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean peninsula” and to do so “in the spirit of “mutual respect and equality.” {2} In fact, throughout the Six Party talks (beginning in 2003), these words, inserted at North Korean insistence, became a leitmotif. The most reluctant party, in 2005 and indeed throughout the talks, was the US, described by former Department of State’s top North Korea expert Jack Pritchard as “a minority of one ... isolated from its four other allies and friends,” and facing an ultimatum from the Chinese chair of the conference to sign or else bear responsibility for their breakdown. After affixing its reluctant signature on 19 September, however, on 20 September the US launched financial sanctions designed to bring the Pyongyang regime down, plainly in breach of the agreement it had just signed. When the US in 2012 proclaimed its commitment to the 2005 principles, therefore, North Korea must have been inclined to accept the assurance with a grain of salt. Blame for the breakdown in the multilateral Beijing negotiations and the stalling of the 2005 (and later, 2007) Beijing agreements (to which now presumably the 2012 agreement will also have to be added) attaches to other parties at least as much as to North Korea.”

One may ask why should one pay any attention to what much of the rest of the world considers a brutal dictatorship?

North Korea has been under constant threat of annihilation from the days of General Douglas McArthur, who wanted to drop more than 30 atomic bombs on the North, to the “axis of evil” of Bubba Bush to Susan Rice’s most recent comments at the UN.

The North has not been given any breathing space divorced from attempts at overthrowing the government. This has been a conscious US policy which was honed during the era of Allan Dulles, OSS and CIA head. Dulles’ approach was simple. If you maintain a maximum overt and covert threat level against an adversary, that adversary is likely, for the sake of survival, to maintain a powerful security apparatus. The more the pressure is exerted, the

stronger the security apparatus will grow. The result of this stimulus-response strategy, Dulles assumed, will finally result in the population revolting. If the pressure was eased, the internal response would likely reflect that easement. There was a small positive ray of hope when former Secretary of State Madeline Albright visited Pyongyang during the late days of the Clinton Administration, which tragically was pushed aside when President Clinton was obliged to fight off impeachment.

A recent blog by Stephen Gowans, titled *Why North Korea Needs Nuclear Weapons* (<http://www.trinicenter.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2438>) reminds concerned people of three salient historic points:

- Asked by *The New York Times* to explain the aim of US policy on North Korea, then US under secretary of state for arms control John Bolton “strode over to a bookshelf, pulled off a volume and slapped it on the table. It was called ‘The End of North Korea’.” “That, he said, ‘is our policy’.”
- In the late 1960s, nuclear-armed US warplanes were maintained on 15-minute alert to strike North Korea.
- In February 1993, Lee Butler, head of the US Strategic Command, announced the United States was retargeting hydrogen bombs aimed at the old USSR on North Korea (and other targets.)

In summary, the conventional demonization of North Korea has resulted in a distorted mirror of reality. To break the cycle of stimulus/response, it is essential that the US and Japan make clear their willingness to negotiate normalization.

As tough and at times infuriating as this may be, it would properly pay homage to all on every side who shed blood on the Korean Peninsula. All issues must be on the table from all three sides. Canada has a critical role to play if it returns to its historical middle-power role crafted by Mike Pearson.

Notes

(1) For details, see my “North Korea and the Birth Pangs of a New Northeast Asian Order,” in Sonia Ryang, ed., *North Korea: Towards a Better Understanding*, Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 23-40

(2) “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six Party Talks” Beijing, 19 September 2005.

End Note <https://mail.google.com/mail/?tab=wm#inbox/13d6491655906cfd>, Francis A Boyle, Professor of Law, University of Illinois, Champaign Under the US Army Field Manual 27-10 and the Hague Regulations, the only requirement for termination of the Korean War Armistice Agreement is suitable notice so as to avoid the charge of ‘perfidy’. North Korea has given that notice. The armistice is dead. See Army Field Manual: “In case it [the armistice] is indefinite, a belligerent may resume operations at any time after notice.”

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