

Dealing with North Korea: Can Balloons and Confetti Change North Korea?

북한을 어떻게 대할 것인가:
북한에 날리는 풍선과 사탕은 북한체제를 변화시킬 수 있을까?

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Self proclaimed South Korean “political activists” efforts to convert North Korea into a mirror image of democratic South Korea needs to be assessed in the context of the deep division in South Korean politics over how best to deal with North Korea. South Koreans since 1945 have faced three daunting tasks: 1. post-colonial and post-Korean War economic reconstruction, 2. democratization, and 3. national reconciliation and unification. Prosperity was achieved in the 1970s. Democratization followed a decade later. Only since the 1980s have Koreans both north and south of the DMZ been able to concentrate on pursuing reconciliation and unification.

South Koreans’ debate over how to deal with North Korea revolves around two polarities: engagement, which some call “Sunshine Diplomacy,” versus confrontation and containment. This division defines two fundamentally different approaches to North Korea. So-called “progressives” tend to align with engagement. “Progressive” Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun championed this approach while their successor “conservative” President Lee Myung-bak pursued a program of confrontational containment.

“Progressives” prefer “soft power” to gradually achieve a “soft landing” of North Korea. This embraces enticing North Korea’s willingness to engage in social and educational exchanges, and economic cooperation aimed at gradually convincing Pyongyang that it has more to gain as a respectable member of the international community. Engagement assumes that North Korea will give up its nuclear arsenal once it perceives the threat to its existence subside. Ultimately this would serve as a prelude to national unification.

Conservatives favor an assertive, more confrontational approach based on “hard power.” They believe “engagement” only strengthens Pyongyang’s ability to perpetuate its authoritarian rule and threat to peace. “Containing” North Korea means condemning its lack of respect for political and human rights while isolating it diplomatically and commercially from the international community. Containment echoes the US favored Cold War strategy first applied to the Soviet Union and People’s Republic of China in 1949, and to North Korea at the start of the Korean War. Conservatives’ goal is to discredit and ultimately undermine the North Korean regime, setting the stage for national unification by bringing about the collapse of the Pyongyang regime.

Today’s balloon launching activists obviously belong to the conservative camp. They believe that launching balloons northward over the DMZ carrying political leaflets critical of North Korea’s leader and his regime will rally popular support for their cause while discredit the North Korean regime in the eyes of North Koreans. Leaders of this movement are a few North Korean “defectors” supported by some South Korean Christian groups, and possibly over political groups. Viewed in the context of modern Korean history, this “balloon” offensive suggests that the movement’s leaders and their methods are impressively naïve.

There is no reason to believe that balloons and political confetti has in the past or will in the future bring about the demise of an authoritarian regime supported by a huge military establishment. If anything, the effort is only impeding President

Park Geun-hye's efforts to pursue a more rational approach to North Korea that straddles the progressive-conservative divide.

History teaches that containment and hard power were ineffective against authoritarian rule the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Recognizing containment's ineffectiveness, US conservative President Richard Nixon in 1971 shifted the US approach to the PRC from containment to engagement. The shift opened the PRC's previously closed society to international commerce, drew it into international organizations which required that Beijing respect international norms of conduct and compelled it to allow tens of thousands of young Chinese to study abroad. Engagement has transformed China into a respected member of the international community that relies on economic rather than political and military competition to promote its interests. Although China's government remains authoritarian, maintains a nuclear arsenal and still lacks respect for human rights, China is no longer feared as a warmonger nor must its people endure the oppression of mass movements like the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. If anything, the strategy of engagement continues to foster progress away authoritarianism. Engagement is similarly transforming Russia.

Applying this lesson of history to the case of North Korea suggests that engagement, better than containment, can promote North Korea's transformation. US Cold War containment of North Korea failed to undermine the regime. If anything, its leader Kim Il Sung used US containment to justify his authoritarian rule and to build a massive military-industrial complex. He also blamed US economic sanctions for all of North Korea's economic woes. Today, North Korea is a greater threat to peace than in 1950 when the US first applied containment because the North Korea regime is building a nuclear arsenal to sustain national survival. This arsenal not only poses the possibility of a second Korean War, it also could ignite another global war.

South Korea's conservatives would also do well to reassess their view of the North Korean regime. Naively many Koreans hoped that the North Korean regime would collapse after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1990 and Supreme Leader Kim Il Sung's death in 1994. Yet despite the loss of its primary allies the USSR and China, famine and economic collapse the regime endured. Two generations after the regime's founder's death, North Korea today not only survives but is restoring its prosperity despite extensive international sanctions and South Korea's reluctance since 2009 to engage it commercially. This success is not a consequence of brilliant leadership in Pyongyang. China has pursued a policy that has contributed significantly to North Korea's economic revival.

Equally important has been the North Korean population's apparent willingness to contribute to the regime's economic recovery. The North Korean people's apparent allegiance to their authoritarian regime could be, at least partially, rooted in the fear that the US "imperialists" are aiming to "strangle" their nation, a pervasive theme of North Korean propaganda. Also important is the fact that the most powerful political element in Pyongyang is the clique of ranking generals. Their support of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un is vital for his effective rule. Kim's dependence on their support gives these generals the ability to significantly influence regime policies. Viewed in this context, two facts become evident: removal via coup or death of the "Supreme Commander" will not necessarily bring about the regime's collapse. A more likely consequence would be the emergence of an even more militaristic regime.

International diplomatic and economic isolation have failed since 1950 to undermine the Pyongyang regime. By comparison, balloons and political leaflets appear to be incredibly feeble weapons against such a formidable regime. Maybe it is time for South Korea's "conservatives" to link arms with their fellow countrymen, the progressives, and jointly pursue a strategy of engagement that has proven effective in transforming two of the world's most powerful, authoritarian regimes.

For Koreans, the Kaesong Industrial Zone is an excellent example of engagement's success on the Korean Peninsula. Engagement promoted change is a gradual process that requires patience and persistence, but at least engagement achieves change while also reducing tensions and the possibility of a second Korean War relative to containment.

But first South Koreans must what is their ultimate goal toward North Korea: is it reconciliation and with the North or demise of the North Korean regime? As they debate this issue, South Koreans must consider what is best for their nation's future. South Korea is a tiny "island" surrounded by water on their sides and bordered to the north by a hostile regime. It lacks natural resources and must rely on vigorous trade and ever improving global economic competitiveness to sustain its prosperity. Flanked to the west by the world's second largest economy, China, and to the east by the world's third largest economy, Japan, South Korea would seem better able to maintain its prosperity if it achieves reconciliation with North Korea and expands their economic collaboration.

Ultimately, only the people of South Korea can determine whether to engage or to confront North Korea.