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Once upon a time, not so long ago, we learned three valuable lessons about dealing with North Korea.

First, it is indeed possible to advance US national security interests through negotiations with Pyongyang. We even found that we had considerable leverage with the North Koreans if we did more than merely paint pictures for them of a sweet and fanciful future.

Second, in talks with the North it is possible to break down complex, seemingly insurmountable problems into component parts and then focus on the parts in a logical order, so that successfully dealing with the first (usually the easiest) boosts the chances of dealing with subsequent, more difficult items.

Third, contrary to the common wisdom, if an agreement is thoughtfully constructed and implemented, the North Koreans will abide by the core of it as long as we do. It should not be a surprise to discover, however that they are likely to game the process, exploiting ambiguities and hedging their bets.

These are not theoretical classroom lessons or the fruit of idle speculation. They come from real experience over many years.

Yet we did a poor job of explaining this experience to the Congress and to the American people. As a result, what we learned, as well as what we accomplished, was buried under a mountain of myth, where it has remained for many years.

Today, the catch phrase "we won't buy the same horse twice" is taken as wisdom in dealing with the challenges posed by North Korea. Unfortunately, it is based on the mistaken but all too easily accepted belief that negotiating with the DPRK is an exercise in flimflammery.

Twinned with that is an assumption, fervently held by many who should know better, that we have, or can garner, enough power to dictate outcomes to the North Koreans. And if they don't do as we insist, the thinking goes, we can wait until they collapse or the Chinese make them come around.

There may be a few still in Washington who remember that in the early 1990s, discussion about North Korea policy centered around the idea of preparing for a "soft landing" – that is, preventing the very scenario that takes up so much nervous energy in various capitals these days, a calamitous and highly destabilizing collapse of North Korea. The concept of a soft landing had a number of advantages as a core policy precept. Notably, it did not handcuff us to fixed and unachievable goals. Instead, it provided necessary maneuver room to pursue our national interests in dealing with the North as the situation warranted. What it did not allow or envision was sitting and waiting while another country shaped the future of Northeast Asia.

I am not attempting to describe a golden era of a lost age. For one thing, in those days, we still had much to learn about dealing with North Korea, at that point not having engaged the North except in the Military Armistice Commission talks at Panmunjom. In fact, then as now many people didn't see the point in even talking to the North Koreans. Our problem on the peninsula was still seen as largely military.

A number of changes in the late 1980s, however, drove home that sending an aircraft carrier to cow the North was no longer a sufficient response. Inter-Korean dialogue and the North's development of a nuclear program meant that the issues for Washington had multiplied and that the challenges presented by the North had become as much diplomatic as military.

It was clear to us that the North Koreans wanted to talk—but why? We developed a pretty good idea ten years ago as we listened to what they said and observed their reactions over hundreds and hundreds of hours of formal and informal contacts. Nor did we merely listen. We explained, we educated, and on occasion, we pounded the table.

But then, abruptly in 2001, we stopped talking and, apparently, stopped listening. As a result, we have lost a decade in which to deal with the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Not only that, in the bargain we tossed overboard all that we had previously gained. As a result, the situation we face today is much more difficult, our leverage is smaller not greater, and our room for maneuver is even more curtailed. If there was a chance ten years ago that we might have stopped the North from conducting nuclear tests and building a small nuclear arsenal—and I believe we did have a good chance—the game has now changed, and not in our favor.

Let me be clear. Our problems dealing with North Korea are not confined to one administration or one party. In the deepest sense, they reflect our national inability, intellectually and emotionally, to understand how states like North Korea work. We fall into overly simplistic thinking. We trap ourselves into seeing only two dimensional figures. Our difficulties are compounded by the fact that public discourse about the North in the US has long been crippled, condescending, irrelevant, and, like heartburn, episodic. There is a general impression in the US that North Koreans live in a blasted landscape similar to the moon, and that all but a privileged few are hollow-eyed and slack-jawed. Any observer contradicting that image, even purely as a matter of fact, becomes suspect.

The word has gone out that we and our allies aim to force the North to change its "unacceptable behavior." We will not negotiate until the North creates the "conditions" for negotiations. If that is our goal, the climb is steeper than we imagine. Years ago, the North Koreans were taught, and the lesson has since been endlessly reinforced, that the world rarely rewards them for good behavior, because whatever they do is never deemed good enough. If they "behave," many North Koreans have become convinced that they will become part of the great power woodwork, something to be ignored and scuffed by the furniture on the way out.

It is widely and confidently stated that North Koreans inhabit the most isolated country on earth. How one would measure such a thing I have no idea, but assuming it approaches the truth, then it must also be true that we are isolated from them. Isolation, after all, is a two-way street.

Yet, in fact, we are more isolated from the North Koreans than they are from the rest of the world. Though the numbers are small in comparison to what are now world standards, DPRK delegations are constantly traveling abroad. DPRK officials tune in outside radio and television, read outside books and newspapers detailing our politics and society. By contrast, at the official level, we keep ourselves largely pristine, don't go there, rarely let them come here, and overall keep contact as limited as we can on the grounds that exposing them to our thinking and our society, our culture and our values is a benefit, a present, a gift. No visas for the DPRK State Orchestra because…well, because. The result? The North Koreans reap tactical benefit from our ignorance, while we develop as a substitute for knowledge a fog of myths about them. And through this fog the North Koreans have learned to maneuver pretty well, like Drake's small ships among the galleons of the Spanish armada.

Now that Pluto is no longer a planet, some people seem to think it has been replaced by North Korea in the universe of strange, cold, and distant places. As it happens, we could define Pluto out of existence. We cannot do the same with North Korea, even if at times our fondest hope is to hold our breath until the country goes away.

Ultimately, progress toward our goals in dealing with North Korea depends not so much on the weight of the force we bring to bear—sanctions, UN resolutions—but on how well we understand the North Korean regime and its views of domestic and foreign policy challenges. If we fail to grasp that North Koreans believe they have their own national interests, then we fall into the trap of thinking we can force them, sweet talk them, or bribe them into doing what we want.

To return to my first point, diplomacy has proven it can work with North Korea if it seeks to discover those places where interests overlap. To the extent that we signal to the North Koreans that we don't see a place for them in our vision of the future of the region, we undermine the basis for realistic discussion of the circumstances in which we might coexist. Do, in fact, such areas of overlapping interests still exist? It is hard to imagine getting at an answer if we don't actually sit down and explore the landscape. Insisting that the North Koreans must first demonstrate a strategic decision to accept our outcome is a sure way of going nowhere fast.

We don't have to know everything about the North to know enough to operate intelligently and effectively in our dealings with them. Here are five interrelated subjects on which a lot of homework remains to be done.

The threat. Compared to where we used to be in our perception of the North Korean military threat, I think we are now on firmer ground, certainly more realistic. I applaud the careful assessment in DNI Clapper's testimony earlier this month, as well as recent comments on this subject by General Sharp, the Commander of US Forces Korea. North Korea is largely in deterrent-defensive mode-- militarily, diplomatically, and in every other way. That, indeed, has been the case for quite a while, and to the extent we can factor that into our calculations and our actions, I believe it more likely we can make progress in dealing with the North. At the same time, and this is crucial, we should not fool ourselves into thinking that we have the North in a box. They have teeth, and as we have seen, they will use them if they feel threatened or toyed with.

The economy. Certainly within the memory of many people in North Korea, there was a time when the North was far ahead of China economically and was, to some extent, seen by parts of the Third World as a beacon of development. We tend to look at the North and see a country hopelessly backward; they see themselves as capable and modern thinking but down on their luck. They make occasional runs at fixing things. Whether they can actually sustain economic revitalization policies long enough to show results, I do not know. If history is a guide, they seem unlikely to get very far on that path without significant changes in how they formulate and apply such policies. Nevertheless, they know very well their economy is not doing well, and they are constantly looking for ways to do better. Again, taking this into account in our own approach can pay dividends. We're not talking here about "bribes" or a "buyout," but rather using the North's own momentum and goals in a way the helps us achieve our own.

The succession. At this point, there is no question that Kim Jong Il's youngest son is being groomed and, more than that, moved into position as the successor. Chinese visitors have met him several times. I trust that we have asked them for their impressions of him. Given how grossly inaccurate early assessments by many outside observers were of Kim Jong Il, I would

urge caution in accepting most of what appears in the press (or even official reporting) about the son's personality or potential. In the absence of very good information to the contrary, I wouldn't operate on the assumption that the succession will fall apart, especially if it has several more years to take root. It was an article of faith of many analysts and governments in 1994 when Kim Jong Il took over from Kim Il Song that he wouldn't last a year. Nearly 17 years later, one hopes they have learned from their mistakes.

The "collapse." Anything is possible once the dam breaks in a society that has for years been under extremely tight political and social constraints, but I wouldn't put my money on the likelihood of near-term North Korean collapse. Yes, of course it makes sense to think about that possibility and to develop scenarios for dealing with such a contingency. In my view, however, it does not make sense to base a policy on the assumption that a collapse will happen soon--that is, in the next 2-3 years. Even those in South Korea normally anxious to portray the North Korean regime as fraying at the edges do not want to lean too far forward at this moment in predicting the likelihood that the uprising contagion from the Middle East will reach North Korea. One thing that ought to be of concern, if we are to look at scenarios, is the possibility that if and when serious social and political unrest ever arrives in the North, it will quickly descend into violence that could make Libya look like a tea party, dragging outsiders into a prolonged, bloody struggle for power.

The role of China. One can get very cogent advice from any number of China experts. All I can say is that having watched Sino-North Korean relations for 30 years, my feeling is that many China experts tend to miss the point that Beijing views North Korea differently than how it views the rest of the world. Consequently, Beijing's policies toward the North often do not track with its broader foreign policy. Sino-Korean relations have had numerous ups and downs over the years. They are very warm right now, perhaps the closest they have ever been. They are unlikely to stay good forever, and we should not treat North Korea as if it is (nor should we want it to be) in China's pocket. But for several years to come, unless, South Korea or the US do something to provide the North with an alternate future, the Chinese shadow over North Korea will grow more pronounced. Even if that translates into increased Chinese leverage over the North (which I tend to doubt), it doesn't mean we can breathe a sigh of relief.

North Korea obviously isn't the jewel in the crown in Northeast Asia, but how the Korean issue is handled will probably be a decisive factor influencing the region for decades to come. The basic problem we face on the Peninsula today is a hangover from the first half of the 20th century. It is, or ought to be, a constant reminder of policy missteps made many years ago by all sides.

I'd hope we would spare a little time and effort to ensure we don't make similar mistakes again. As much as fires in the rest of the world and issues at home loom large, there is no reason for us, through inattention or ignorance, to sow the seeds of problems that could bedevil East Asia for a long time to come.