COMMENTARY

What Would a North Korean Do?

Washington Must See Issues from Adversaries' Perspectives in Order to Move Past Outmoded Policies

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On an unremarkable evening in Seoul, South Korea, I walked into an unmarked office space located on the second floor of a small office building. There, I met a short, middle-aged Korean man by the name of Choi Jong-hoon. The office itself belonged to the North Korean People's Liberation Front (NKPLF) —an organization of former North Korean soldiers opposed to the Kim regime in the North. Mr. Choi, a former North Korean soldier himself, was the commander in chief of the group.

I met with Commander Choi that day to get some answers. More specifically, I had some questions about a particular province in North Korea: Jagang province. During the course of my studies on North Korea, Jagang province proved to be an anomaly. Most North Korean defectors—about 80 percent—hail from one of the four North Korean provinces that share a border with China, of which Jagang province is one. All provinces in this area produce more defectors than almost any other provinces to the south, with the notable exception of Jagang province. Despite sharing a border with China, Jagang province accounts for a shockingly small portion—just 0.5 percent—of all North Korean defections, while its neighboring provinces account for a combined 79.5 percent of all defections. This was despite the fact that Jagang province had a greater population than at least one of the neighboring provinces. Something about Jagang province was leading to an extraordinarily low number of defections, and I wanted to know what it was. On that day, Commander Choi was going to give me some answers.

I divide my time spent as a North Korea watcher into two distinct phases: the time before I learned to speak and understand Korean, and the time after. Although there is a wealth of English-language resources on North Korea studies readily available online, being able to speak Korean changed the game entirely. While I understood much about North Korea before learning Korean, it was only after acquiring language skills that I have been able to learn about North Korea directly from the people who once lived there and to gain insight into issues with which only they are familiar. In essence, language allowed me to begin to think like a North Korean, by which I mean deeply understanding the circumstances, mind-set, and perspectives of our adversaries to the north.

It was out of a desire to think like a North Korean that I sought out Commander Choi that day. At our one-on-one meeting, he explained to me that Jagang province is heavily fortified and, because of its military importance to the regime, has very stringent security measures even by North Korean standards. Furthermore, he explained, due to the high security needed, only people deemed sufficiently loyal to the regime are allowed to live and work there. The result of these policies and other factors was that Jagang province, despite being perfectly positioned to be a significant source of defections, produced very few.

There was, however, also an ideological aspect to the issue as well. As Commander Choi explained, the other provinces along the border had been historically seen as less loyal to the regime and were thus subject to particular forms of neglect. With the exception of Jagang province, the northern provinces typically bore the brunt of the hardships that North Korea experienced over the years. As a result, these provinces tended to be more ideologically hostile to the regime.

It was not just a simple case of geography, or even just a case of Jagang province being a more regime-friendly province. In reality, there was a lot more at play in that the people of the other provinces were not just normal North Koreans but were actually on the opposite side of the spectrum—they were borderline *unfriendly* toward the regime. This meant that, despite the typical view of North Korea as a type of ideological monolith, there are, in fact, areas that the regime itself historically considered hostile, and this reality could be seen in the regime's treatment of the people there and the subsequent willingness of those people to defect. For us on the outside, this characteristic manifested itself in a statistical gap of defections by province.

Commander Choi was not the first North Korean defector with whom I spoke directly, nor would he be the last. Eventually, through speaking with many defectors from all walks of life—from poor, hostile northerners to loyal Pyongyang elites—I was able to attain greater insight into and better understanding of North Korea and North Koreans. This new insight did, in some cases, change my opinions on a number of issues regarding North Korea.

Fast-forward to the present day, and the United States once again finds itself at odds with the North Korean regime. With a new presidential administration in place in Washington and a North Korean weapons program that seems destined to press on, there may be a desire to hastily concoct and enact "new" (but perhaps not entirely novel) North Korea policy measures. By doing this, however, the Biden administration risks committing the same critical North Korea policy mistake of the past: failure to truly understand North Korean intentions, goals, and what can realistically be expected of them.

Previous North Korea policy initiatives were typically conducted while critical questions regarding North Korean intentions remained unanswered. In lieu of answers to these questions, Washington has instead tended to form and enact North Korea policy based upon assumptions. These assumptions filled in for valid information and clarification on Pyongyang's willingness to negotiate sincerely, denuclearize, liberalize its society and economy, go to war, and so on. These assumptions—often wrong—in part contributed to the sometimes predictable collapse and failure of most efforts at North Korea negotiations and policy. The result of these successive failures is a North Korea problem that is not only more dire now than ever before but is also still a mystery in a number of respects. In effect, many of the critical questions regarding North Korean intentions that confronted the policy makers of the past remain unanswered to this day.

If Washington wishes to not repeat the mistakes of the past, it must first seek answers to these critical questions. If the Biden administration wishes to succeed on the North Korea policy front and enact comprehensive and effective North Korea policy, then it must make every effort and leverage every resource to better understand North Korea and North Koreans.

Perhaps the most critical of questions regarding North Korean intentions is Pyongyang's willingness (or lack thereof) to truly denuclearize. Indeed, the answer to this question alone could have a dramatic effect on the direction of future North Korea policy and the prospect of success for that policy. Given just how long the issue of North Korean denuclearization has confronted Washington, the fact that North Korean intentions on this issue are still not well known or understood is troubling to say the least, and the lack of clarity makes for a great stumbling block for forming effective policy. Needless to say, policy vis-à-vis a North Korea that is sincerely willing to denuclearize can and should be very different from policy for a North Korea that is unwilling to denuclearize. Before the United States can settle on a direction for North Korea policy, it must first answer this key question.

The question of willingness to denuclearize is only one in a long list of questions Washington must seek to answer before formulating and enacting policy. Other key questions include whether or not Pyongyang is willing to open the country, allow liberalization of its society and economy, address its human rights record, dismantle its international and cyber-criminal enterprises, and so on. Answers to these questions will indicate how far, if at all, Pyongyang is willing to go in terms of reform and offer Washington multiple options for reducing the tensions felt between the two countries.

Washington must also understand, however, that an answer to a question does not necessarily indicate an end to the clarification needed on a particular issue. In

many cases, an answer—even a less than desirable one—can and should lead to further questions. If, for example, it is revealed that Pyongyang is not truly willing to denuclearize, policy makers should then consider exactly *why* this may be the case. This is also important because the answer to this question can also adversely affect the direction of policy and the options available. The policy "fix" for a North Korea that is, for example, unwilling to denuclearize out of insincerity and nefariousness is very different from a North Korea that will not denuclearize out of genuine fear or distrust. In the response to the latter, there is still room for progress, and Washington must also seriously consider whether the specific reason for not denuclearizing is an issue that itself can be resolved via other policy means.

In the same vein, policy makers must also understand that the North Korea issue is inherently a dynamic one and that negotiating with North Korea today is different from negotiation attempts of the past. North Korea, as a country, a society, and even as a government, today faces significant and verifiable stressors and crises because of the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and failed economic policy. The failures were so significant that Kim Jong-un himself took the unusual and surprising step of publicly admitting to, and accepting responsibility for, the failures. At a time when North Korea is particularly stressed and vulnerable, the United States must consider whether there is more room to leverage Pyongyang's desires now. North Korea's current situation may provide an opportunity for the United States to better gauge North Korean intentions and, perhaps, provide a viable off-ramp from Pyongyang's current path. As the situation evolves, however, Pyongyang's willingness to denuclearize may also ebb and flow. This liability to change is also something about which Washington must remain aware.

Similarly, Washington must also take careful inventory of its own policy goals and, in response to clarification on North Korean intentions, reassess the best path forward. One key tendency of Washington's negotiation platform is the inclination to focus on denuclearization above, and sometimes at the expense of, other initiatives. Given Pyongyang's historical hesitance to negotiate nuclear issues outright and the failure of such a focus to produce tangible results thus far, Washington would do well to consider whether increasing efforts toward other initiatives may produce more favorable results. This is particularly worth exploring as Pyongyang already has some nuclear capability. Nominally, Pyongyang developed nuclear weapons for the singular goal of regime survival—specifically as a deterrence to outside aggression. In essence, Pyongyang believed that nuclear weapons were key to its survival, and therefore, it developed nuclear weapons. A possible approach by Washington can be to convince Pyongyang that nuclear weapons are *not* key to regime survival, and that such survival is better entrusted elsewhere—such as by collaborating with the United States and its allies. This can

be achieved by offering Pyongyang viable alternatives for survival that do not involve the more reprehensible activities typical of its state policy, including, for example, human rights abuses, international crime and terrorism, and cyber vandalism. Instead, Washington can offer economic, diplomatic, and military incentives for change. This method, though by no means guaranteed to succeed, cannot be conducted if negotiations on nuclear weapons continue to dominate Washington's diplomatic agenda. To that aim, Washington must consider first (or concurrently negotiating) other issues and build trust with the Kim regime—*if* it is determined that the lack of trust is a barrier to progress on the nuclear issue.

Though the temptation to enact North Korea policy and respond to the North Korea problem quickly may be strong, the Biden administration would be wise to resist the urge. The North Korea problem is far more complex now than ever before, and, to form effective policy and have a real shot at solving things once and for all, the outstanding questions regarding Pyongyang's desires, intentions, and willingness must be resolved. By working to better understand the true nature of the challenge, Washington can gain greater insight on exactly how to best address the issue and avoid the blunders of the past. Though by no means a guarantee of success, greater understanding of North Korea on the cultural, societal, political, economic, scholastic, and military levels will lead to better understanding of Pyongyang's greatest concerns and intentions. In turn, this would better equip Washington to negotiate with Pyongyang—particularly at a time when Pyongyang may be more open to sincere negotiations considering the dire conditions faced at home. While it is difficult to tell exactly where negotiations with Pyongyang will go from here, it is nevertheless clear that a new strategy is very much warranted.

The key to this strategy, however, is not the strategy itself but the principles and vision upon which it would be founded. Washington must develop a wider, more comprehensive vision of the North Korea problem now, the North Korea problem then, and the best direction in which to take the North Korea problem moving forward. This key first step that Washington must take before establishing a promising North Korea policy is best accomplished by, in essence, thinking like a North Korean—or carefully considering the issues from the North Korean perspective to better gauge and understand their scope and value within negotiations. Understanding how North Koreans think regarding economic, social, military, and other critical issues will better equip negotiators to avoid the diplomatic errors of the past and better understand—for better or for worse—the validity of negotiations with North Korea moving forward.

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