

# Is Engaging North Korea Still Useful?

SHIN Gi-Wook  
Stanford University

SHIN Gi-Wook is professor of sociology and Director of the Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University. With his colleagues David Straub and Joyce Lee, he co-authored a policy report “Tailored Engagement: Toward an Effective and Sustainable Inter-Korean Relations Policy,” released last September at a hearing of the Korean National Assembly’s special committee on inter-Korean relations in Seoul. A Korean-language version was published this month.

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The strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula has continued to worsen over the past several years. To produce material for more nuclear devices, Pyongyang has proceeded with a large-scale uranium enrichment program, in addition to its long-standing plutonium production facilities. The North is also busily developing longer-range missiles that target South Korea and Japan as well as the United States. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently said in written testimony to the House Appropriations Committee’s Defense Subcommittee that North Korea has taken steps toward deploying an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) believed capable of reaching the U.S. mainland.

Unfortunately, there is no initiative on the horizon likely to change this dangerous trajectory. The United States was willing to negotiate with Pyongyang when there was a chance of preventing it from developing nuclear weapons. With that goal now deemed unachievable, Washington is instead intent on containing the threat through increased sanctions and counter proliferation efforts, missile defense, and strengthened defense cooperation with South Korea and Japan. Any form of U.S. engagement with North Korea is off the table and likely to stay that way.

Earlier hopes that China would prove to be a deus ex machina have also foundered. While Beijing does not want Pyongyang to have nuclear weapons, it has always been more concerned about preventing instability in the North that might spill across their shared border. More recently, Beijing’s leaders deepening suspicions about U.S. strategic intentions, illustrated by the heated controversy over the possible deployment of THAAD in South Korea, have made North Korea even more important to China as a strategic buffer. China remains by far Pyongyang’s most important foreign supporter,

as reflected in the burgeoning trade across their border.

That leaves South Korea as the only country that could play a larger and more positive role in tackling the North Korea problem. South Korea is no longer a “shrimp among whales,” as it used to think of itself, but a major “middle power” with strong economic and military power. Strategically, Seoul is becoming increasingly important to Washington, as well as Beijing.

South Korea, however, has been a house deeply divided when it comes to how to deal with the North. Conservative administrations, fearing that a North Korean nuclear arsenal would change the long-term balance of power on the peninsula, have made the North’s denuclearization a condition for virtually all engagement. Progressive governments, however, have glossed over the nuclear issue, believing that increased contacts will eventually promote change for the better in Pyongyang. The result has been South Korean policies that, whether from the left or the right, have proven unsustainable and ineffective.

Based on a year long study, my colleagues and I have called for more active South Korean leadership to ameliorate the situation on the Korean peninsula. We call the concept “tailored engagement.” It is based on the conviction that engagement is one means of dealing with North Korea, and an essential one that must be carefully “tailored” or fitted to the changing political and security realities of the Korean peninsula. It eschews an “appeasement” approach to Pyongyang as well as the notion that inter-Korean engagement under the current circumstances would be tantamount to accepting the North’s misbehavior, especially its nuclear weapons program.

Such engagement would not immediately change the nuclear situation however, it need not encourage Pyongyang in that matter either if carefully considered and implemented. Meanwhile, it could help to reduce bilateral tensions, improve the lives of ordinary North Koreans, and bring the two societies closer together. It could reduce the risk of conflict now while fostering inter-Korean reconciliation and effecting positive change in the North.

South Koreans must first, however, develop a broader domestic consensus in areas that do not undermine international efforts to press Pyongyang to relinquish nuclear weapons. That is possible because many forms of engagement are largely irrelevant to the nuclear program. For example, South Korea could provide more humanitarian assistance to ordinary North Koreans it could also engage in more educational and cultural programs, including sports exchanges. Concrete offers of expanded economic exchanges and support for the development of the North’s infrastructure could become part of an incentive package in renewed Six Party talks on ending the North’s nuclear program.

As skeptics contend, even a carefully “tailored” engagement strategy is no panacea. It is only one tool to deal with the North?military deterrence, counter-proliferation, and human rights efforts are

among the others that are essential?but why not try all available means when the situation is so worrisome? With only three years left in power, the Park government does not have much time to formulate an initiative toward the North. It is now time for the government to be bolder with a strategy of “tailored engagement.”

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