

Engage, don't isolate

Jerome A. Cohen wants to see the US drop economic sanctions against North Korea and revive academic and business exchanges as a way to spur progress in six-party talks and encourage Pyongyang to open up to the world

The December 19 announcement of Kim Jong-il's death has stimulated another round of useful debate in the United States about how it and its South Korean and Japanese allies should deal with North Korea. Predictions about what is likely to happen under the new leadership of Kim Jong-un run the gamut, and suggested policies are just as diverse.

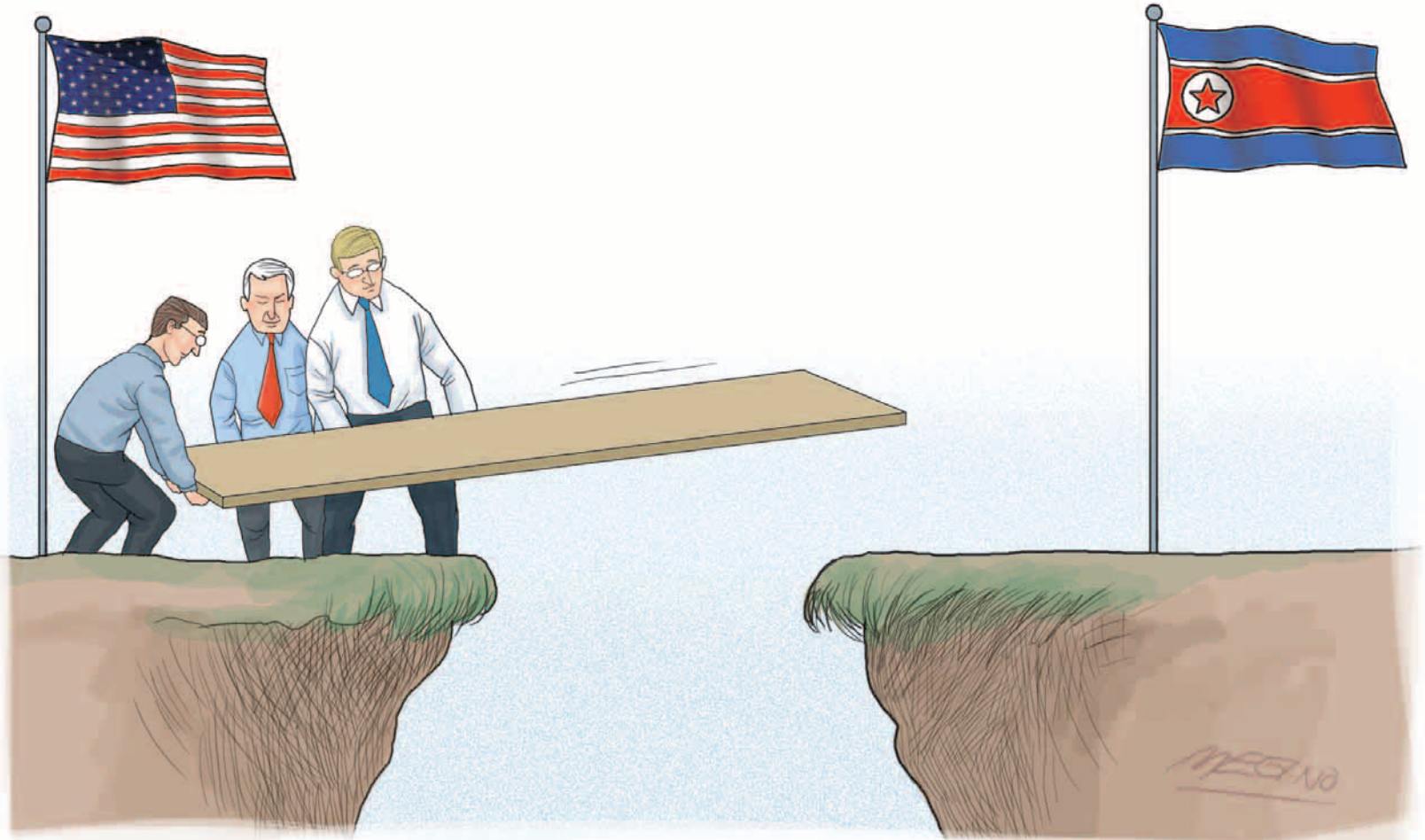
Victor Cha, a respected scholar and former White House director of Asian affairs, has written that "North Korea as we know it is over. Whether it comes apart in the next few weeks or over several months, the regime will not be able to hold together ..." He and others who share this view may be right and, as he suggests, we must be better prepared for such a contingency. Yet, we have heard such dramatic warnings before. For example, just as he was leaving his post as director of central intelligence in 1996, MIT professor John Deutch pronounced, with equal certitude, that the hermit kingdom would implode within three years.

Understandably, many experts believe that, despite the huge problems confronting North Korea and the untested "great successor" who has inherited his late father's mantle, the current political system will endure for the foreseeable future. How to cope with both contingencies is the biggest challenge facing Washington's recent policy re-emphasis on East Asia.

Some analysts claim that American knowledge of the North and ability to influence developments there are so limited that the best course for now is to wait and see what success China may have in stabilising conditions in North Korea and prodding it into a more co-operative foreign policy.

Others favour grasping what may be a new opportunity to revive earlier efforts to engage Pyongyang in a range of business and academic exchanges that began to bear fruit in the last years of the Clinton administration. Unfortunately, the Bush administration refused to build on those exchanges, and the Obama administration's first three years, with occasional exceptions, have also been disappointing in this respect.

To be sure, North Korea's participation in the six-party talks concerning its development of nuclear weapons is critical. Yet the US should not allow the frustrations of the six-party talks to bar progress in a host of other areas. The US needs to increase its contacts with and knowledge of the North. It should also eliminate its remaining economic sanctions against the North and create incentives for this military-dominated regime to give more emphasis to economic development. Such steps to broaden Korean-American engagement should not only contribute to improvements in the six-party talks, which otherwise seem destined to limp off and on forever, but also set the stage for the



long overdue normalisation of bilateral diplomatic relations.

The Obama administration should, of course, continue its uphill struggle to persuade Beijing to join Washington and Seoul in preparing for the dangerous possibility of a collapse of the North Korean government. Yet this should not preclude a sustained effort to establish business, academic, journalistic, cultural and athletic exchanges with Pyongyang. The US should vigorously promote, not impede, its participation in the world.

Moreover, as experience with China and Vietnam demonstrated, opening a broad programme of exchanges has the additional advantage of significantly expanding the



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number and kinds of citizens who are exposed to an important but previously closed country. This will provide valuable new information and perspectives for US policymakers.

Personal experience leads me to believe that Pyongyang may welcome this approach. In 1972, my family and I were the first Americans, other than three journalists, permitted by the US to visit North Korea. We went in the hope of initiating business and academic exchanges. Pyongyang, obviously stunned by China's then recent opening to the US, wanted to explore prospects for crafting a similar relationship. But two weeks of frank discussions made clear that North Korean officials were still far too rigid to emulate Zhou Enlai (周恩來).

When I returned 25 years later, the situation had changed radically. My hosts, although reluctant to acknowledge the impact of the increasingly successful Chinese model, seemed eager to learn how they might adapt it to their own circumstances, as Vietnam had done a decade before. This led, from 1998 through 2000, to a series of training seminars in international business law that New York University School of Law, with the aid of the

Asia Foundation, held in China for North Korean officials.

In early 1998, this also resulted in a group of Pyongyang foreign commerce specialists, who were seeking trade and investment, going to Washington and New York at the invitation of the Council on Foreign Relations. Preliminary contract discussions concerning several industries subsequently took place in Pyongyang, and North Korean officials even used their newly acquired learning in international law to persuade Singapore's High Court to release the ship of one Pyongyang company that had been erroneously detained in a suit brought against another Pyongyang company.

These promising beginnings ended with the ascendance of George W. Bush. In the months before Kim Jong-il's death, however, there were signs that the Obama administration might cautiously encourage a revival of unofficial exchanges. It should now seize the moment.

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