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New Approach Needed for Korean Missile Crisis

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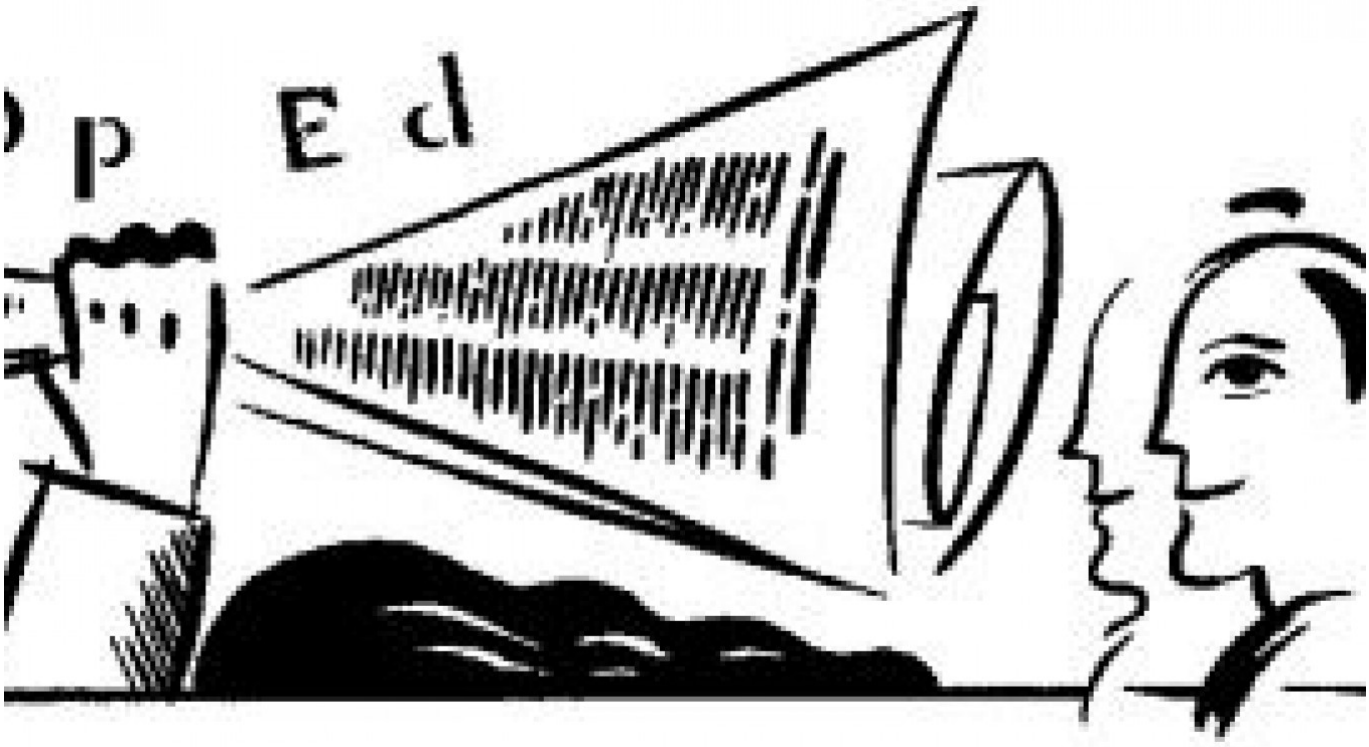

The world's task in addressing North Korea's saber-rattling is made no easier by the fact that it confronts an impoverished and effectively defeated country. On the contrary, it is in such circumstances that calm foresight is most necessary.

Klemens von Metternich, a prince in the Habsburg Empire, framed a new international order after the Napoleonic Wars. His ingenuity was in the fact that he did not push a defeated France into a corner. Although Metternich sought to deter any possible French resurgence, he restored France's prewar frontiers.

By contrast, as former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger has argued, the victors in World War I could neither deter a defeated Germany nor provide it with incentives to accept the Versailles Treaty. Instead, they imposed harsh terms, hoping to weaken Germany permanently. We know how that plan ended.

U.S. President John F. Kennedy was in the Metternich mold. During the Cuban missile crisis,

he did not try to humiliate or win a total victory over the Soviet Union. Rather, he put himself in Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's shoes and agreed to dismantle, secretly, U.S. missiles in Turkey and Italy in exchange for withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. Kennedy's pragmatism prevented World War III.

Sadly, North Korea has not received such far-sighted statesmanship. Faced with the North's dangerous nuclear game, we should ask what would have happened if, over the last 20 or so years, the North Korea problem had been approached with the sagacity of Metternich and Kennedy.

Of course, North Korea is not early 19th-century France or the Soviet Union of 1962. In the eyes of Western (including Japanese) political leaders, it has never amounted to more than a small, fringe country whose economic failings made it appear to be poised perpetually on the edge of self-destruction. For the most part, world leaders preferred not to be bothered with North Korea and so reacted in an ad hoc way whenever it created a security problem. But now, following Pyongyang's recent nuclear tests and given its improving ballistic missile capabilities, that approach is no longer tenable.

Perhaps the best chance to address the problem at an earlier stage was immediately after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Back then, Kim Il-sung, North Korea's founder, faced economic collapse, diminution of his conventional military forces and diplomatic isolation. In interviews with Asahi Shimbun and The Washington Times in March and April 1992, Kim clearly expressed a wish to establish diplomatic relations with the U.S. But U.S. and South Korean leaders were not ready to accommodate Kim's overture. Their received ideas about North Korea prevented them from recognizing a fast-changing political reality.

Another opportunity was missed later in the decade. If North Korea had reciprocated in a timely manner following U.S. envoy William Perry's visit to Pyongyang in May 1999, President Bill Clinton's policy of engagement with Pyongyang might have been upgraded to a push for normalization of diplomatic relations. Instead, North Korea procrastinated, sending Vice Marshall Jo Myong-rok to the U.S. only in October 2000, near the end of Clinton's presidency. A few months later, newly elected President George W. Bush reversed Clinton's North Korea policy.

As South Korea's foreign minister, I still recall the difficulty that I faced in convincing Bush administration policymakers to negotiate with North Korea instead of merely applying pressure and waiting for Pyongyang to capitulate. Back then, North Korea was restarting its Yongbyon nuclear facility and producing plutonium, thus strengthening its bargaining position vis-a-vis the U.S. Precious time was squandered before North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006. Though Bush shifted his policy toward bilateral negotiations with the North a few months later, the Kim regime had become much more obstinate.

Indeed, North Korea's behavior has since become even more volatile. Its sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 were unprecedented. These actions raised inter-Korean tensions to their highest level in decades. Today, following Pyongyang's third nuclear test, we seem to have entered the most precarious stage yet, with the regime declaring that it will never surrender its nuclear option. So what should be done?

The first option should be deterrence of further aggression through diplomacy. But achieving

diplomatic deterrence will depend on China's cooperation, and this requires that China's vital national security interests be recognized. China fears not only the social and economic consequences of a North Korean implosion, but also the strategic consequences of reunification — in particular, that the U.S. military, through its alliance with South Korea, would gain access to territory on its border.

A mere statement by the U.S. that it has no intention to press this military advantage will not assuage China's fears. Chinese leaders recall that the U.S. promised Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that German reunification and democratic transition in Eastern Europe would not mean eastward expansion of NATO. So a more concrete undertaking, one that preserves South Korea's bedrock security concerns, is needed. Only after its security is assured will China free itself from complicity in North Korean brinkmanship and be better able to control North Korea's erratic behavior.

But Chinese cooperation, though necessary, will not resolve the North Korea problem on its own. A comprehensive approach must recognize the speed of internal change, especially in the minds of ordinary North Koreans. Simply put, North Koreans are not as isolated as they once were. They have a growing appreciation of their impoverishment, owing primarily to greater trade and closer connections with booming China.

This internal change needs to be encouraged because it will prove more effective than external pressure in influencing the regime's behavior. But such encouragement must be undertaken in ways that do not incite Pyongyang's fears of being destroyed by indirect means. Despite the recent spike in tension, South Korean President Park Geun-hye's recent proposal to provide humanitarian assistance is a start in the right direction.

The lives of ordinary North Koreans matter as much as the security of North Korea's neighbors. A comprehensive approach is required — one that focuses as much on the human dimension as on the security dimension. It remains to be seen whether this approach requires more foresight and courage than today's political leaders in South Korea, the West and China can muster.

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