

Turning a Carrot into a Stick

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Yet again, North Korea has proved it deserves the ire of Japan and the world after announcing on February 10th that it has “manufactured nukes” and is suspending participation in the six-party talks. Adding fuel to the fire, Pyongyang audaciously accused Japan of inaccurately analyzing the false remains of abducted Japanese national Megumi Yokota. Who can blame the Japanese public for demanding that all ties with North Korea be summarily cut off?

Starting next month, only a handful of North Korean ships will be permitted to dock at Japanese ports, as a revised marine indemnity insurance law takes effect. And public outrage is pushing the Koizumi Cabinet ever closer toward imposing unilateral economic sanctions against North Korea. Tightening the noose around North Korea’s economy is an understandable option, and one that seems increasingly realistic. But if Japan really wanted to punish the regime it might consider the unorthodox—launching a vast new economic initiative with North Korea.

In a previous column, I argued that Japan should not rush toward sanctioning North Korea for several reasons. First, sanctions would give Pyongyang an opportunity to call off the six-party talks on the North Korean crisis and blame Tokyo for the impasse (as it turns out, Pyongyang denied itself this opportunity by withdrawing from the talks anyway). Second, Pyongyang has stated in the past that it would regard the imposition of sanctions as an act of war, which the mercurial regime might just trigger. Third, levying sanctions would forfeit Japan’s main “stick” for dealing with the North Korean regime.

Aside from these problems, history has shown that unilateral economic sanctions are among the least effective tools in international statecraft—seldom achieving their ultimate purpose of turning recalcitrant regimes into humbled nations willing to abide by international norms. On the contrary, sanctions often harden the resolve of regimes, giving dictators an opportunity to blame foreign powers for their own failures. (Witness Cuban leader Fidel Castro, who has survived 40 years of U.S. sanctions and outlasted nine U.S. presidents.)

Under the present circumstances, the idea of expanding—not cutting off—Japan’s economic ties with North Korea sounds outlandish to say the least (and it is suggested with that caveat fully in mind). But, done in the right way, expanding economic ties with the North would be vastly more threatening to Kim Jong Il than squeezing off the estimated 27 billion yen of trade that annually trickles its way between North Korea and Japan.

If Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi really wanted to punish Pyongyang, he could announce a major new economic development initiative for North Korea, with the ultimate aim of catapulting the North into the information age. Japan’s initiative would include a massive program to provide computers and high-speed Internet access to every household in North Korea. The only condition would be that, unlike the North-South industrial park in Kaesong, the project would have to be available to all North Korean households across the country.

Japan's largess would be a great boost to the North's economy. North Korean workers could finally trade their hammers and sickles in for computers. Armed with advanced computer technology and a 99 percent literacy rate, North Koreans could become one of the best-educated and competitive workforces in the world. North Korea could eventually become a competitor in hardware and software production, Web design, and tech support.

On top of that, North Korea would become the envy of the Third World. How many developing nations would long to have an IT infrastructure completely paid for by another country? How could Kim Jong Il refuse an offer that would push his nation's economy into the 21st Century and close the gap with South Korea as the world's leader in high-speed Internet connectivity?

If all this seems like more than North Korea deserves, consider what it would mean to Kim Jong Il's regime. Nothing, save a military invasion, would be as threatening to the regime as a sudden influx of information and the empowerment of its people through the Internet. Like similar regimes, the stability of Kim Jong Il's government depends on the restriction of free speech and the tight control of information.

Widespread access to the Internet in North Korea would immediately erode the regime's ability to control information and public debate. Citizens would be exposed, for the first time in a generation, to information about the outside world and how much better off it is than North Korea. Kim Jong Il's carefully crafted cult of personality would be dismantled, as North Koreans learned that their leader is not revered but ridiculed around the world. Perhaps best of all, North Koreans could find out for themselves about the true nature of their regime and its depraved abduction of Japanese nationals throughout the years.

Of course, this scenario stands little chance of ever reaching reality. Even before North Korea's recent announcement, Tokyo was too angry to offer such a deal and Pyongyang too paranoid to accept one. But the other reality is that Japan's "stick" of economic sanctions against North Korea is actually more like a twig—unlikely to produce results beyond the gratification of further isolating an already reclusive regime. All the more gratifying, though, would be shining the spotlight on Kim Jong Il every time he turned down a "carrot" that helped his own people.

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