


Ping-Pong Diplomacy for the 21st Century in the DPRK?

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David Von Hippel

Nautilus Institute

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David Von Hippel is a Nautilus Institute Senior Associate working on energy and environmental issues in Asia, including on nuclear spent fuel management issues.

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While returning to consciousness following a brief-but-appreciated-moment of sleep during another coach-class flight across the Pacific, I found myself remembering a fragment of a dream. In the dream, I was co-authoring this article with former U.S. President Richard M. Nixon. Not such a bad idea, I thought—Nixon, after all, opened his side of the door to China for America, and thus maybe would have some ideas about doing the same with the troublesome Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Then it hit me—Nixon was dead, and thus likely unavailable to be a co-author (except in the fictional world of Matt Groening's Futurama— confused readers may wish to ask a convenient teenager what this reference to popular culture means). I could have treated that revelation in a rational way by chocking the dream up to what it undoubtedly was: yet another sign of rapidly encroaching dementia. Any scrap of an idea can be of use, however, so I started wondering: what WOULD Richard M. Nixon, in the shoes of current U.S. President Barak Obama, do about the DPRK? Two insights followed that question. The first was that given the asymmetries in weaponry between the U.S. and the DPRK, Nixon would have had a hard time restraining himself from pursuing a military solution. The second was that, lacking both the talent and academic background to pursue such a question with any rigor, and any conviction that the result would, in fact, be of use, it was better for me just to leave the question unanswered. Moreover, parallels between the China-US relationship of the 60s and 70s and the DPRK-US relationship of today are not particularly strong, in several respects. But what if the dream was a metaphor? Is there a kind of "ping pong diplomacy" that the U.S., and/or the international community more broadly, might pursue with the DPRK to help turn the recent tide of belligerent rhetoric?

The Wind Farm in the Cabbage Patch

Fifteen years ago, several years of careful behind-the-scenes preparation resulted in a joint project between groups from the DPRK and the United States. The stated aim of this collaboration between Nautilus Institute and its (nominally) non-governmental North Korean partner was to build a wind-power system to help address the humanitarian needs of a flood-affected village on the West Coast of the DPRK. In energy terms, the impact of the project could never have been more than tiny, but the project's subtext, namely "let's show that North Koreans and Americans can work together productively", had potentially wider repercussions. In its modest way, that project proved to be a

success in both senses. The power system we left in the farming community of Unhari produced power for many years. At some times of year, it supplied the only power available in the village. Even the most durable electrical equipment only lasts so long, and the equipment in Unhari survived until hard use and the lack of access by our technical team rendered a key piece of the system inoperable. And a simple water-pumping windmill erected by our project continues to operate today, or so we were told by a recent visitor. But the project also paved the way for many additional collaborations over the years between Nautilus Institute and its DPRK counterparts, collaborations that have provided a window on the DPRK to us and many others, and vice versa. Perhaps there is a project that can be pursued today that could serve the same role, albeit on a broader scale, of engagement and confidence-building.

A Demonstration and Engagement Project for the DPRK

What might such a project look like? Well, when Nixon sought to encourage China to open its economy, he didn't start by proposing a Walmart be built in the middle of Beijing. Similarly, if the goal is to start the redevelopment of the DPRK's energy system, which is itself a key to both economic redevelopment in and resolving the nuclear weapons issue with the DPRK, the place to start is not with a Walmart analog, such as a large nuclear reactor or wholesale reconstruction of the DPRK electricity grid (much as the latter, at least, is needed), but rather something small, fast and cheap.

Beyond these attributes, a collaborative project must be of obvious use to both the DPRK government and the international community. From the DPRK's perspective, this means the project should have symbolic as well as practical value, such as showing North Koreans adopting advanced technology while cleaving to the national "juche" philosophy of self-reliance. For the international community, the project should offer an opportunity to provide humanitarian assistance, with little or no risk of diversion of project benefits to the military. For both groups, the project should provide a demonstrable and practical, if necessarily pilot-scale, approach to addressing the DPRK's energy security problems, as well as an opportunity for engagement and capacity-building that can be expanded over time. The project could have some elements similar to those that we proposed in 2010 for conversion of the DPRK's Yongbyon nuclear complex, though at this point the opportunity for Yongbyon conversion itself is likely past, and probably will not arise again for years.

More generally, and as we have previously suggested, combined economic/energy development/capacity-building projects in the DPRK could be based around redeveloping the economic and energy sector in a local area of the DPRK, perhaps a village or, if a broader scale is desired, a small county. Such a project could begin with an assessment of the current energy needs and resources of the area, and the joint development of a plan for a sustainable, peaceful set of economic activities for the area. The latter could range from a small mine producing a commodity of value on the international market (but probably not gold, as gold mines in the DPRK have a special ownership structure), production and processing of specialty agricultural items, production/assembly of renewable energy devices such as solar photovoltaic panels and lighting kits, solar hot water heaters, or water-pumping windmills, to small-scale manufacturing of export goods and handicrafts. To support such ventures, renewable energy systems relying on micro-hydro, wind, and/or solar power could be installed, at least initially with a diesel engine-generator for back-up power, together with a local electrical grid. Energy efficiency could be demonstrated through improvement of buildings in the area (insulation, new windows, and other improvement), as well as the demonstration of the benefits of energy-efficient lighting, appliances, motors, and other devices. Reforestation is needed throughout the DPRK, and the development and monitoring of a reforestation effort, together with other soil conservation efforts and in tandem with improvement of agricultural productivity, could be a part of the project as well. The project would provide

humanitarian assistance through the provision of energy services (light for studying, warm homes) and employment opportunities, but would likely also include elements such as improvements in village clinics and schools, better processing and storage of agricultural outputs, and improved sanitation and drinking water supply.

Potential Project Results

Such a project would put hundreds of North Koreans in regular contact with dozens of foreign experts, the latter drawn, for example, from national laboratories, universities, companies, and international institutions, who would provide capacity-building in areas from renewable energy to environmental monitoring and health care. For leaders, the project would provide a demonstration of ongoing progress in cooperation that they can point toward while messy and difficult negotiations over a broader settlement of the DPRK nuclear weapons issue continue. The project could also be a way of “nucleating”, through example, change in the DPRK economy and energy system, changes that could redevelop the DPRK economy at the grassroots level, eventually to be integrated and interconnected into a sustainable economy with fully normalized trade relations with the rest of the world.

The day on which Dunkin’ Doughnuts stores are present on every corner in downtown Pyongyang, as they are many areas of Seoul, is not inconceivable, but not near. China’s roaring economy was not built overnight, and the DPRK’s redevelopment will similarly require practical starting points for what will ultimately be hundreds of billions or trillions of dollars of economic development. A well-thought-out, but still cheap and quick, DPRK/International Community cooperation and engagement project could be such as starting point.

References and Further Reading

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Nautilus Institute

2342 Shattuck Ave. #300, Berkeley, CA 94704 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org