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Calm in Korea is only a phone call away

By Kishore Mahbubani

Kim's fears present Obama with an opportunity, writes Kishore Mahbubani



Dennis Rodman reported after his visit to North Korea that Kim Jong-eun wants Barack Obama to call him

In announcing that it will restart its nuclear facilities, North Korea seems to many people to be behaving strangely. In fact, North Korea is behaving predictably: it is issuing belligerent statements, cutting off hotlines and taking ever more threatening postures. The big question is: should the response of the world be equally predictable?

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The US seems to think so. It refuses to talk directly to Pyongyang, preferring to continue with isolation and sanctions. This is the wrong approach. It is reasonable to fear that North Korea wants war. But its record shows that bellicosity is the only way it believes it can get attention. Maybe it is time to show North Korea that it does not have to behave weirdly to get talks going.

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To understand why, let's go back to basics. Diplomacy was invented thousands of years ago to enable us to talk to our enemies. It prevented envoys from having their heads chopped off at rival courts. Diplomacy was never primarily about communicating with friends.

The conventional wisdom among “strategic” thinkers in Washington is therefore a historical anomaly. No leading US thinker dares to advocate the establishment of diplomatic relations with Pyongyang because such an act would be seen as support for the regime.

There have been many indirect encounters between US and North Korean diplomats but this is not enough. It seems impossible to change the Washington elite's assumptions about diplomacy. The rest of the world has come to the wise conclusion that it is better to talk to enemies, even enemies of thousands of years. This is why Chinese and Vietnamese, Turks and Greeks, Russians and Poles, Koreans and Japanese, Indians and Pakistanis (and I could go on) have established diplomatic relations and talk to each other. This has become the universal norm. The US is the exception. This gives China, which will one day soon become the biggest economy in the world, a free run in some of the most important diplomatic initiatives. Take the recent meeting between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Russian foreign policy experts know that China represents a bigger long-term strategic challenge than the US. So why are Mr Putin and Mr Xi co-operating so well? Because the US has been clumsy and humiliating in its approach to both countries. What is worse is that few people in the US realise the extent to the humiliation.

North Korea is an opportunity for the US to change its approach. There is a pressing need to try a fresh approach in the region – one that goes beyond predictable moves such as a general “pivot” or a trade deal.

This could well be Barack Obama's enduring legacy and gift to the American people: to prepare them for a world where the US is not the only superpower. And a shift towards normality means that the US must also begin talking to all its enemies, just as every other state does.

Amazingly, when Kim Jong-eun was asked what he would like to see happen, he said simply: please ask Mr Obama to call me. (This is according to Dennis Rodman, the former professional basketball player, who recently went on a “diplomatic” mission to North Korea with Vice magazine. His trip was scoffed at by the mainstream media – but at least he went.) And why did Mr Kim want to talk to Mr Obama? Because he is more worried about the threat from China than from the US.

Almost any other pair of rival states would have the phone call. This reflects age-old diplomatic wisdom. As François de Callières, the special envoy of Louis XIV of France, wrote in 1716: “Every Christian prince must take as his chief maxim not to employ arms to support

or vindicate his rights until he has employed and exhausted the way of reason and persuasion.”

Mr Obama should heed the advice of the sun king’s aide. (And while he is at it, he should call Tehran, too.) Every wise leader throughout history has found a way to talk to their enemies. North Korea is a scary country and it is hard to know how seriously to take its threats. But it is even harder if you do not talk to it. The time has come for the US to follow the wisdom of the ages – and to be unpredictable.

The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore and author of ‘The Great Convergence’

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