The Disappointments of Disengagement: Assessing Obama’s North Korea Policy

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As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama boldly promised to enhance US engagement with North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea; DPRK). But in his first term as president, his administration was determined to significantly lower the foreign policy priority of North Korea and carried out a policy of concerted disengagement, an approach the administration called “strategic patience.” The strategy of disengagement showed disappointing results by late 2010, and so the United States made a begrudging, tactical adjustment by starting tentative bilateral talks with the DPRK. When the preliminary result of those talks—the “Leap Day Deal”—fell apart in 2012 over the satellite launch controversy, the wrong lesson was learned: that neither sanctions nor engagement works with Pyongyang. The real lesson of Obama’s North Korea policy is the failure of disengagement. **KEYWORDS:** Barack Obama foreign policy; engagement; North Korea; nuclear proliferation; US-DPRK relations.

**DESPITE ROUTINELY IDENTIFYING NORTH KOREA’S NUCLEAR PROGRAM**
as a top national security issue over the past four years, the Barack Obama administration has in fact significantly lowered the priority of dealing with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The administration has also placed decisions about North Korea behind larger strategic concerns, such as managing the rise of China and heading off the Iranian nuclear program. This reduced attention to North Korea comes as something of a surprise, because as a presidential candidate Obama indicated that he would strengthen US engagement with North Korea. The conventional account is that Pyongyang behaved provocatively and irresponsibly, thus leaving Obama no choice but to “punish” the DPRK. However, a closer examination of the record, drawing on the accounts of administration officials themselves, reveals that once in office the Obama administration was, for a variety of
reasons, predisposed to carry out a policy of concerted disengagement. The administration spurned high-level contacts and serious negotiations with Pyongyang in favor of an approach it called “strategic patience.”

In this article I identify the factors that led Obama down the path of disengagement: the widespread view in Washington that Pyongyang would never give up its nuclear weapons, making negotiations about them a fool’s errand; the mixed results of the George W. Bush administration’s second-term engagement efforts and the aversion to investing political capital on an issue that produced such limited returns; intensified speculation that the North Korean regime might soon collapse in the wake of Kim Jong-il’s stroke in August 2008; optimism that sanctions were getting “smarter” and might be more effective in punishing Pyongyang—and would send a message to Iran, a higher counterproliferation priority; frustration in cooperating with Beijing combined with the perceived utility of a threatening North Korea in containing China’s rise; and, last but not least, the new South Korean president’s reversal of Seoul’s decadelong engagement policy. Together, these six factors disabused President Obama of any serious interest in talking to Pyongyang. Kim Jong-il, predictably, met the US disregard and South Korean implacability with confrontational measures of his own. A vicious cycle was set in motion.

By late 2010, it was becoming painfully apparent in Washington that disengagement was not “breaking the cycle of North Korean provocations” (Sanger and McDonald 2010). Nor were sanctions slowing down their nuclear program or leading the Kim regime to the brink of collapse. The United States therefore attempted a tentative bilateral pre-engagement initiative in the second half of 2011. However, US and DPRK diplomats tripped over their own feet in this fledgling effort, which culminated in their announcement of a deal on February 29, 2012. The swift demise of this so-called Leap Day Deal generated a false lesson: neither engagement nor sanctions can change North Korean behavior. When it comes to Pyongyang, nothing works.

A closer analysis reveals that disengagement and deprioritization remained at the core of the Obama administration’s approach