A Better Approach Towards North Korea

In 2003, Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi agreed with the US and Europe to end his pursuit of nuclear and chemical weapons in order to normalize relations with the West. Eight years later, NATO abetted his overthrow and murder. Now we are asking North Korea to end its nuclear program as we once asked of Qaddafi. North Korea's leaders must be wondering what would await them if they agree.

US foreign policy is based on the idea that the US can dictate who rules and who does not, and which countries can keep nuclear weapons and which cannot. Moreover, the US Government reserves the right to change its opinion on these matters. It supported Qaddafi until it did not. It supported Saddam until it did not; it supported Iran's Mohammad Mossadegh in the early 1950s until it joined the UK in toppling him; and it supported Panama's Manuel Noriega until it toppled him. This list goes on, and North Korean leaders must suspect that they are next.

There is a huge problem with this strategy. Not only does it sow enormous discord and violence around the world. It also sows a deep distrust by other countries of US intentions and policies, and contributes to an arms race by at least some of these countries. Iran and North Korea pursue nuclear programs in part to ward off the kind of regime change that they've seen other non-nuclear opponents suffer at the hands of the US.
America continues in the regime-change business to this day. The current target is Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, whom we've declared, "must go." He's a very nasty guy, no doubt, like many others around the world. Yet by declaring that Assad must go, the US and Europe contributes to an escalation of bloodletting as the Assad regime brutally battles a rebellion stoked by Western arms and US intentions to topple Assad.

In fact, America's real target is not even Assad, but Assad's main backer, Iran. Americans are trying to topple Assad mainly to staunch Iran's regional influence in Syria and Lebanon. We claim we are tightening the noose on Assad, but in fact we are abetting the devastation of Syria itself as the result of a proxy war with Iran.

Through decades of practice, regime change comes naturally to the US Government and especially to the CIA, which carries out much of the operational support. Yet the US Government fails time and again to factor in the serious and sustained blowback that inevitably follows our overthrow of foreign governments. Consider, for example, the history of our current confrontation with Iran.

In 1953, the US and UK conspired to overthrow Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, who had committed to the grievous sin of believing that Iran's oil belonged to Iran rather than to Britain and the US. Mossadegh was brought down by the CIA and MI6 and replaced by the despotic Shah of Iran, who governed ruthlessly with US backing until the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In light of this history, Iran's current pursuit of nuclear-weapons capability is far more understandable.

Iran also has three not so friendly nuclear neighbors - Israel, India, and Pakistan - all of which are allied with the US despite their failure to sign, ratify, or honor the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Being a nuclear power is based on, well, power, not on international law. That the US demands that
this or that state must denuclearize while others flout the treaty is an assertion of power, not principle. Nor are such demands likely to be heeded by Iran, given their plausible fear that unilateral disarmament would be met not by peace with the US, but by US attempts to destabilize the regime.

Which brings us back to North Korea. Secretary of State John Kerry is onto something when he broaches the idea of opening negotiations with North Korea. Every experienced observer in the world notes that North Korea's erratic behavior is mainly an attempt to be heard, acknowledged, and respected. As Kim Jong-un told basketball star Dennis Rodman, he simply wants Obama to call him, "because if we can talk, we can work this out."

But Kerry then went on this weekend to make the usual US demands. There will be no phone call until North Korea first pledges to denuclearize. In other words: surrender first and we'll talk afterwards.

I am reminded of one of John F. Kennedy's most famous admonitions: "And above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy -- or of a collective death-wish for the world."

If we act calmly and sensibly, we can easily defuse the current crisis. North Korea is looking for respect, not war. It's time to talk, to lower the heat, and to avoid a confrontation or the imposition of impossible or humiliating demands. And we need to remember, if we are to induce good behavior among others, we will have to stop our bad habit of killing them afterward.