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**A Moment to Seize With North Korea**  
by Donald Gregg and Don Oberdorfer

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il's remarkable statements to a South Korean envoy last Friday present a rare opportunity to move promptly toward ending the dangerous nuclear proliferation crisis in Northeast Asia. The Bush administration should seize the moment.

The reclusive leader told South Korea's minister of unification, Chung Dong Young, that he is willing to return to the six-nation talks on his nuclear weapons program if the United States "recognizes and respects" his country. More than that, according to Chung, he raised the prospect of reversing his burgeoning nuclear program, rejoining the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which he abandoned two years ago, and welcoming back U.N. nuclear inspectors in return for a credible security guarantee.

The U.S. national interest as well as the interests of our Asian partners in the talks - all of whom favor much greater U.S. engagement with North Korea - call for a positive response from Washington. This would be particularly welcome in Seoul, which both of us visited last week.

For starters, we suggest that President Bush, after touching base with our Asian partners -- South Korea, China, Japan and Russia -- communicate directly with Kim Jong Il to follow up on his remarks. He might consider offering to send Assistant Secretary of State Chris Hill and Ambassador Joseph DeTrani to Pyongyang to prepare for a visit to Kim by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The purpose would be to explore the policies behind Kim's words to determine whether practical arrangements can be made, subject to approval by our partners in the six-nation talks, to end the dangerous North Korean nuclear program.

In efforts to reassure North Korea, the United States has repeatedly declared that it recognizes North Korean sovereignty, has no hostile intent and is willing to arrange security guarantees and move toward normal relations with Pyongyang once the nuclear issue is resolved. Kim's remarks present a golden opportunity to take the U.S. offers to the one and only person in North Korea who has the power of decision. According to those who have met him personally in the past -- including former secretary of state Madeleine Albright, former South Korean president Kim Dae Jung and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi -- Kim is more flexible than anyone else in his government. That is not surprising, since he sets the line and others must follow.

As we well know, this is not the first time that Kim has sought engagement rather than hostility with President Bush, whom he discussed in surprisingly positive terms last Friday. During a visit we made to Pyongyang in November 2002 following a nuclear-related trip by Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, we were given a written personal message from Kim to Bush declaring: "If the United States recognizes our sovereignty and assures non-aggression, it is our view that we should be able to find a way to resolve the nuclear issue in compliance with the demands of a new century." Further, he declared, "If the United States makes a bold decision, we will respond accordingly."

We took the message to senior officials at the White House and State Department and urged the administration to follow up on Kim's initiative, which we have not made public until now. Then deep in secret planning and a campaign of public persuasion for the invasion of Iraq, the administration spurned engagement with North Korea. Kim moved within weeks to expel the inspectors from the U.N.'s International Atomic Energy Agency, withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and reopen the plutonium-producing facilities that had been shut down since 1994 under an agreement negotiated with the Clinton administration.

Now the North Koreans are believed to have produced the raw material for at least a half-dozen nuclear weapons and many believe their claim to have fabricated the weapons themselves. Early this year North Korea declared that it has become "a full-fledged nuclear weapons state" and that it is working to produce still more atomic arms, all in response to U.S. hostility.

Kim's statements in Pyongyang Friday may be a sign that he is uncomfortable with persistent pressure from the United States and his Asian neighbors to return to the six-nation talks, which he left a year ago. He may also be feeling the pinch of deepening food shortages in his country. By reversing his nuclear program in return for the guarantees he seeks, Kim could avert stronger measures being discussed in Washington and other capitals to force the issue. These measures, in our judgment, promise only greater confrontation and growing danger on all sides.

By visiting Pyongyang and engaging Kim, Rice would not be condoning North Korea's human rights practices. The State Department has made clear that human rights is an issue to be resolved in negotiations on establishing full U.S. relations, not in talks on the nuclear question. If she responds to Kim's latest statements with a well-prepared visit and successful negotiations, Rice will have earned her spurs as America's chief diplomat.

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