

Will North Korea make Obama's trifecta? Don't bet on it

Obama's moves to improve relations with Cuba, Iran lead to speculation that North Korea may be next

June 9th, 2015
Tim Beal



Recent changes in foreign policy towards Cuba and Iran have naturally led to people wondering, and some urging, that there will be a similar shift in policy towards North Korea, with others opposed to the idea. Two points to start with. Firstly, neither rapprochement is a forgone conclusion and the Iran deal, in particular, under attack from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Israel and the Republicans, may well fall apart. Moreover, if that does happen it will almost certainly be because of domestic struggles in the U.S., though of course it will be blamed on the Iranians.

Secondly, the fact that these are American initiatives does not mean that America is, or has become in Obama's second term, a peacemaker enticing hostile and recalcitrant nations to the negotiation table. On the contrary, it is probably true to say that all governments around the world want to have good relations with the United States. That often does not apply to the people in those countries, or non-state actors such as Al Qaeda or Islamic State (though more goes on behind the scenes than we are told).

Nevertheless, no government can ignore the fact that the U.S. is the largest economy in the world (despite China's advance in Purchasing Power Parity terms) and the global military, diplomatic and softpower hegemon. The consequences of American hostility are horrendous, as evidenced for instance by the famous satellite photo of the Korean Peninsula at night, showing the South lit up and much of the North in darkness. That does not mean that governments will do a deal with Washington on any terms, nor that there will not be ploys and feints in the course of negotiations. Nevertheless, such is the greatly unequal structure of international power that it is the default position for governments to want good, even friendly, relations with the United States – whatever their private feelings might be – and the decision on that lies mainly with Washington.

That applies to North Korea. Good relations means the end of the military threat and the lifting of sanctions and other forms of economic warfare, and warmth in that relationship would offer a counterbalance to China.

But will anything happen? Will there be a “North Korea deal?”

The United States is the major player in each set but in a sense it is a different U.S. each time

To attempt to answer that question we must analyze the three different relationships, examining them in their geopolitical context, and exploring the positions of not merely the major actors but the main supporting ones as well. The United States is the major player in each set but in a sense it is a different U.S. each time. That is because the domestic constituencies involved are different, as are the strategic imperatives in each case. That means that one cannot assume, as some do, that because the U.S. has talked deals with Iran and Cuba, it will do the same with North Korea.

THE CONSTITUENCIES

Iran to start with. Clearly the main domestic constituency is the pro-Israel one. This is mainly Jewish, revolving around AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee), but also brings in evangelical Christians. Both components are powerful but the leverage of AIPAC over any aspiring politician is legendary. U.S. elections are hugely expensive and it is difficult to get elected to Congress if you are offside with AIPAC and don't get the financial sustenance required. As a result Congress tends to put the perceived interests of Israel first, even at the expense of the U.S. Netanyahu's invitation to speak to Congress, cutting across the presidency, is an example. It is no accident that Obama has only moved forward on negotiations with Iran in his second term, when re-election is no longer an issue.



Photo by Marcelo Montecino 

The Cuba constituency is another matter again. Early émigrés from Cuba were virulently anti-Castro and played an important role in fashioning U.S. policy, especially through those politicians based in Florida (think Jeb Bush) or with a Cuban background (think Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz). However Cuban America has changed over time and the younger generation is more open to good relations with their former homeland (perhaps because it is former, and foreign to them) and they join the majority of Americans in wanting rapprochement.

And then there are Korean-Americans. Who speaks for them? Is it warriors such as Victor Cha or the peace-makers such as Christine Ahn? Clearly Cha has the ear of the policy elite (he did serve under George W. Bush) and so that of the mainstream media but the peace lobby remains active.

The U.S. military-industrial complex is in all three scenarios, but in different ways. Cuba, and Latin America, is not an area of great interest. The Middle East clearly is, but in a hugely complicated way. The arms manufacturers want to preserve profitable markets in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf and Israel and so would oppose a deal with Iran, but the military perhaps is different; there is, after all, a *de facto* alliance with Iran to fight ISIS in Iraq. There is no such confusion in Northeast Asia, where both the arms industry and the military have a common interest in opposing a peace deal.

The opposing regimes and societies are dissimilar to each other

Turning to the situation in the field we again get three very different scenarios. The opposing regimes and societies are dissimilar to each other, although Cuba and North Korea are alike in having a long struggle with the U.S. The social structures are different and, in particular the middle class in Iran is particularly strong. Rouhani is their man, and bears their dreams. That they may well be disappointed is a problem for the future, but for the moment it does make Tehran more receptive to U.S. overtures.

The geopolitical contexts all have their specific characteristics. In respect of Iran the main supporting players are Israel, followed by Saudi Arabia, the Gulf emirates and Turkey. Further afield Russia and China have to be taken into account. It is a very complex situation and American policy is marked by strategic incoherence and political confusion. It fights ISIS in Iraq, rather halfheartedly but effectively supports it and other Jihadists in Syria. It opposes Iran, the largest democracy in the Middle East in alliance with autocratic and despotic Saudi Arabia with its embarrassing habit of public beheadings. And then there is the nuclear issue which it is ostensibly, if not in reality, all about. Iran is castigated even though it has neither nuclear weapons, nor, according to the Director of US National Intelligence, a weapons program. Israel's nuclear weapons, which are scarcely denied anymore, are in official American discourse neither mentioned nor criticized.

Nuclear weapons are not an issue in respect of Cuba, or Latin America. Here the main challenges to American ascendancy are traditional anti-gringoism, of which Cuba has been an inspiration, and the Chinese economic offensive. Premier Li Keqiang's recent visit to the hemisphere, with talk amongst other things of a railway, presumably financed and built by the Chinese, from the Pacific coast of Peru to the Atlantic coast of Brazil, is yet again a demonstration of Chinese vigor. The Castro brothers are very old and the U.S. no doubt wants a voice in the post-Castro world and sees the re-establishment diplomatic relations opening up that possibility.

ASIA IS DIFFERENT

In Northeast Asia the main supporting players are China, Japan, Russia and South Korea. The geopolitics is much less confused. The U.S. attitude towards peace negotiations is indicated by the very frosty reaction to WomenCross DMZ. Kerry's recent visit to South Korea made it clear that the administration has no intention of doing a deal. Firstly there was the vituperation directed at Kim Jong Un and Pyongyang. Not the sort of thing to do if you want to talk peace. Then there was the familiar ploy of preconditions; no talks unless Pyongyang first conceded the objective of the negotiations.

But it was the main purpose of Kerry's visit that made clear, once again, the underlying dynamics. He was there to promote THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) deployment in South Korea. This is aimed at China, and Russia, with North Korea being mainly a pretext. Seoul realizes this and has been resisting; it makes South Korea a target for China and offers little added protection against the North since it is not suitable for low-altitude missiles. However, the containment of China is the centerpiece of U.S. policy so as long as a threatening North Korea is seen as necessary to justify its military presence in the region, and hold the fractious

alliance together – relations between Seoul and Tokyo are pretty toxic – then there will be no peace with Pyongyang. If Washington decides that peace on the Korean Peninsula would serve its China strategy better then there might be movement but that is highly unlikely. The bets are that whatever happens in respect of Iran and Cuba, there will be no deal with North Korea.

NK News, Washington

<http://www.nknews.org/2015/06/will-north-korea-make-obamas-trifecta-dont-bet-on-it/>