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President Obama's Edsel problem

By Donald P. Gregg

Fifty-five years ago, the Ford Motor Company unveiled its highly advertised new car, the Edsel, which it expected to sell spectacularly. Instead, the Edsel flopped from the moment of its introduction, and is now rated one of the 50 worst cars of all time.

How did that come about? Apparently in those days Detroit's engineers were vulnerable to a virulent form of groupthink that produced failure, not success.

I fear that today President Obama has a sort of "Edsel problem" as far as his North Korea policy is concerned. Many Washington policymakers focused on Korea have, since the advent of the George W. Bush administration, fallen victim to the collective belief that talking to North Korea would be a form of rewarding bad behavior on Pyongyang's part, and that pressure, in terms of sanctions and military threats can wean North Korea away from its belief that developing nuclear weapons is the surest way to protect itself from U.S. attacks.

This policy has failed totally, but no one in Washington wants to say that, as such would be a personal admission of past error, something fatal to future career advancement. Secretary of State John Kerry, powerfully qualified for his new position, wants to bring fresh thinking to key positions such as Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, but this is being resisted by the White House, which seems to believe that perhaps if we lean harder on China, Beijing will convince Pyongyang to accede to our wishes.

China may be somewhat helpful in this way, but will never push Pyongyang toward collapse, or regime change, which some in Washington still seek.

In North Korea, we are dealing with a new leadership convened by Kim Jong-un that is prepared to change the rules of a game that has led nowhere for the past 60 years. To those viewing this dramatic change of course from the outside, the current North Korean leadership appears oblivious of the selective restraint shown at times by Kim Jong-un's grandfather and father.

These pundits, government officials and assorted experts assert that Kim Jong-un is taking his country rapidly into extremely dangerous waters with a degree of bluster and threat that outstrips anything his forebears have produced.

Defining North Korea's change of course in this partial way that is solely in terms of Kim Jong-un's bizarre performance — makes it easy for Washington "Edselians" (to coin a phrase) to say "We can't talk to that guy, he sends us messages carried by Dennis Rodman."

I think that the key player in this very fluid scene may be President Park Geun-hye. I knew both her parents, and believe that she has inherited her father's steely resolve and her mother's compassion.

She is now preparing to meet John Kerry, who plans a visit to Seoul within a week. I have no idea what they will say to each other, but I believe that they are both astute enough to recognize that more of the same, i.e. more pressure and more sanctions, will not do the trick.

For those willing to listen, North Korea has made it clear that what it wants to talk about is a peace process, leading to a peace treaty. A peace process needs a foundation of mutual trust upon which it can be constructed, and there is no trust at all between Washington and Pyongyang at the moment.

President Park calls her yet-to-be-designed North Korea policy "trustpolitik." That in itself is a step in the right direction.

I hope that the meeting in Seoul with Secretary Kerry can produce some small forward steps, confidence building measures perhaps, that can be discussed and fleshed out in May, when Presidents Park and Obama meet in Washington.

President Obama demonstrated the powers of his personal involvement during his recent trip to the Middle East. He has been wisely restrained in what he has said about the current situation on the Korean peninsula. He needs to become involved directly, with some fresh thinking.

More policy Edsels lead nowhere but to the potential tragedy of a conflict whose eternal epitaph would be "Why did we fight them when what they wanted was a peace treaty?"

Gregg served as ambassador to Korea between 1989-93 and is currently chairman of the Pacific Century Institute.