

This opinion piece “A ‘New Model’ for engaging North Korea” by Spencer Kim appeared in the Korea Herald on January 25, 2012.

## A ‘New Model’ for engaging North Korea

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In North Korea, the king is dead, long live the king. Now what? I say we need to find a new way forward. Let me explain.

At its meeting last October, the World Economic Forum’s Global Agenda Council for Korea (<http://www.weforum.org/content/global-agenda-council-korea-2011>) called for a “New Model” for relations between North Korea and the world. That call is even more valid with the death of Kim Jong-il. I chaired that Global Agenda Council and I will present the “New Model” at the WEF’s full meeting in Davos in late January.

There are two elements to the “New Model.” First, there must be engagement with North Korea and it must be “holistic, sequential, sustained and consensual” (HSSC). Second, there must be an attempt to develop an “empirically rigorous and transparent epistemic community on North Korea.”

Before I go into detail on these two elements, let me first say that I found chairing the WEF Council on Korea an exhilarating experience. The Council was composed of 14 members; four were businesspersons like myself, eight were academics, one a diplomat and one clergyman. We came from South Korea, Europe, the U.S., Japan and China. We were tasked by WEF to look with fresh eyes and to set aside preconceptions. During three days of discussion we were also encouraged to engage in cross conversations with other councils that were meeting simultaneously to discuss functional and regional issues. The format was robust — old ideas and notions were challenged — and I was impressed with the enlightenment the process created.

Our council concluded that the current model for interaction between North Korea and the international community was constrained by reliance on all sides on a rigid political and security framework and distorted by a mutual demonization that often disregarded empirical reality.

The call for a “holistic” approach means simply that all sides have to realize that there are issues on all sides that have to be addressed. No side is going to get only what it wants without addressing what the other side wants and without understanding that all of these interests and concerns are interrelated.

“Sequential” means that no side is going to get all of what it wants completely before the concerns of the other are met. There has to be a step by step process that leads to all around satisfaction.

“Sustained” means that all sides have to realize it is going to take time and they are going to have to keep at it and not break off whenever one side says, or, unfortunately, does, something the other side(s) don’t like. Likewise, all parties are going to have to restrain themselves from resorting to words or actions that might play well domestically but have a negative impact on engagement.

Finally, “consensual” recognizes that no side has the power to force its will, much less a final and satisfactory conclusion, on the others. While the goal of a denuclearized Korean peninsula is acknowledged and confirmed (still comprehensive, verifiable, and irreversible (nuclear) Disarmament (CVID)), there is going to have to be a flexible and innovative approach taken that requires multilateral cooperation. The exploration of confidence building measures, such as those used by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, might be a starting point.

This “New Model” of HSSC seems especially apropos now. The DPRK is undergoing a power transition. Throughout 2012 many of the other concerned parties are also going to also face a transition. Adopting a holistic, sequential, sustained and consensual approach can lay the groundwork for serious progress in 2013.

The second element of the “New Model” is the creation of a reliable “epistemic” community on North Korea. It was clear to those of us on the council, that there is no agreement among “experts” on North Korea on even on the most narrow set of facts, and no reliable understanding of the workings of the international community, and the players in Northeast Asia, among North Koreans. In other words, considering the magnitude of the issue, we don’t know much about each other — but we do have a full panoply of preconceptions and stereotypes constantly played back by both the media and propaganda to the point that reality has been distorted out of all proportion. And we are all, on all sides, unconsciously victims of the distortion. Like the poor souls in Plato’s Cave, we see the shadows and allow our imaginations to conjure up a distorted reality.

If you need any proof of the above, the torrent of blather from “experts,” amid a trickle of insight, following the death of Kim Jong-il provides it. A few really know some things; while the majority do not. However, that did not stop them from pontificating as if they did. Most described events through previously existing ideological lenses and institutional biases. The council’s conclusion that there was no rigorous epistemic community existent on the North Korean issue was made glaringly obvious. I have followed Korean issues for decades, I have met many of the players involved, I have traveled to North Korea several times — and I am not sure I know what I think I know. But I do know enough to recognize nonsense; and I heard a lot of it. It all reminded me both of what Robert Carlin — of Stanford University, who really is an expert — said in his March 2011 testimony before the U.S. Congress, “in fact, we are more isolated from the North Koreans than they are from the rest of the world” and the observation of Donald Gregg, former CIA station chief in and ambassador to Seoul, that North Korea is America’s longest running intelligence failure.

The council recommended that multiple channels of public and private-sector direct and indirect communications among North Korea and the other players be established. This should include invitations to North Koreans to participate in the WEF process — the 2012 WEF Forum on East Asia for sure, and perhaps the 2012 WEF New Champions meeting in China and the 2013 Davos meeting itself. Given that the potential role of economic cooperation could become more important, the Council also recommended the creation of an ad hoc WEF

International Advisory Board on Economic Interaction with the DPRK.

The leadership transition in North Korea means that there is a new decision-making process in Pyongyang. There will be new decision-makers in many other capitals by 2013. It is imperative that we start to build an epistemic community in all the countries involved that can provide a common basis for analyzing the issue of the DPRK and its relations with its neighbors. I will do my part at the WEF. I will also do what I can to stimulate a vigorous Track II process — in the NGO, think tank and university spheres — that repeatedly brings together experts from all the sides involved so we can start to break out of the straightjacket that we have allowed ourselves to be tied up in.

By Spencer H. Kim

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