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Talking To Evil

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If there's one thing about North Korea that is widely known, it's that there's no point in negotiating with it. After all, President Bill Clinton reached a landmark nuclear deal with North Korea and it then cheated and secretly produced nuclear weapons on the side, rendering that agreement no more than worthless paper.

Alas, that one "fact" is wrong. And since the perception that negotiation failed is so widespread -- and shapes our unwillingness to negotiate with Iran and Syria, central players in today's Middle East crisis -- it's worth setting the record straight.

Vice President Dick Cheney's approach -- often paraphrased as, "we don't negotiate with evil; we defeat it" -- has hobbled foreign policy over the last six years. It let North Korea outmaneuver us and made progress in the Middle East impossible.

Last month, President Bush led an international gnashing of teeth about North Korea's missile test. But at the end of the day, despite a U.N. resolution that was a significant achievement for the administration, North Korea is continuing its missile development and plutonium production.

Mr. Clinton and Mr. Bush offer us a nice test case of alternative approaches to dealing with rogue regimes -- engagement and deal-making in the case of Mr. Clinton, and confrontation and isolation in the case of Mr. Bush. So let's look at how well each approach worked.

North Korea began obtaining plutonium under President Ronald Reagan and the first President Bush, and that rogue behavior led at the beginning of Mr. Clinton's presidency to frenzied negotiations that culminated in the Agreed Framework of 1994.

That was the deal in which North Korea would get oil and nuclear reactors in exchange for freezing and eventually dismantling its nuclear weapons program. Republicans were furious, noting correctly that North Korea was in effect blackmailing us by making us pay to stop its outrageous behavior. Moreover, North Korea soon began to cheat: it secretly tried to develop an alternative route to nuclear weapons using enriched uranium.

Mr. Bush, seeing the Agreed Framework as the mollicoddling of tyrants, backed out of it in 2002.

Alas, this approach worked even worse: North Korea revived its plutonium program and converted old fuel rods into enough plutonium for a half-dozen weapons. And North Korea is now adding enough plutonium for about one weapon a year.

So here's the score card: Mr. Clinton's negotiated approach prevented North Korea from making a single ounce of plutonium during his eight years in office (no one seriously asserts the opposite). In contrast, North Korea will have obtained enough plutonium for about 10 weapons on Mr. Bush's watch.

What about North Korea's cheating? That didn't involve plutonium but efforts to purchase equipment to enrich uranium and make weapons by a separate path. And that effort apparently never got off the ground; the intelligence community is pretty sure that North Korea hasn't made any uranium bombs

under either Mr. Clinton or Mr. Bush.

So, zero new nuclear weapons under Mr. Clinton, and enough plutonium for 10 weapons under Mr. Bush: that's a fair indication of which approach works better.

Instead of negotiating directly with evil regimes, Mr. Bush has used a strategy of persuading proxies to help: China in the case of North Korea, and friendly Arab states in the case of Syria. That has failed because those proxies don't share our strategies and don't have much influence.

Relying on the Chinese doesn't work, for example, because the North Koreans and the Chinese privately can't stand each other. I'm told that after the missile tests, the Chinese government requested an urgent meeting to transmit a message to Kim Jong Il -- then the Chinese seethed because the North Koreans made them wait three days before even listening to the message.

There simply is no substitute for engaging directly, even with brutal regimes, as President Richard Nixon did so successfully with Mao's China. And Mr. Bush has dealt repeatedly with one odious regime: Sudan's. Mr. Bush hasn't been able to stop the genocide in Darfur, but he did end the war between northern and southern Sudan, a conflict that had cost two million lives over 20 years. That was a triumph for Mr. Bush, and it came through relentless negotiations.

So with the Middle East in crisis, let's hope that Mr. Bush will try direct negotiations with Syria and even Iran. Negotiations may not be pretty, but the evidence shows that they work far better than tooth-gnashing.