

The strange case of Dennis Rodman in North Korea

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The spectacle of the former American professional basketball star, Dennis Rodman, in North Korea, is a strange event. After three visits to Pyongyang last year, Rodman put together a team of ex-NBA players to stage an exhibition match against the North Korean national team as a “birthday present” to the country’s leader, Kim Jong-un.

The trip is even more bizarre given that it comes in the wake of a highly publicised purge of the North Korean leadership last month, during which Kim Jong-un’s uncle, Jang Song-thaek, was denounced as a traitor plotting a factional coup, stripped of all positions and executed. Jang was widely regarded as the regime’s No. 2 leader, installed to mentor the young Kim Jong-un following the death of Kim’s father, the former leader Kim Jong-il, in December 2011.

Unlike his previous trips to North Korea, Rodman’s latest visit attracted widespread condemnation, particularly in the American media, for his failure to criticise his “friend” Kim Jong-un over the regime’s human rights abuses, particularly its imprisonment of American Christian missionary Kenneth Bae.

The furore reached a crescendo with a CNN interview with Rodman and his team on Tuesday. Interviewer Chris Cuomo deliberately baited an inarticulate and confused Rodman, who defended the trip, and his friendship with Kim, and implied that Bae got what he deserved. Fellow basketball player Charles Smith tried to smooth things over, repeating the line that the trip was purely about sport, not politics.

In the midst of his incoherent rambling, Rodman hinted at the underlying purpose of his trips. Clearly under a great deal of pressure from Cuomo, he praised the willingness of his teammates to face media abuse, declaring: “One day, one day this door is going to open because of these ten guys.” A more urbane Smith

chimed in: “You have to understand we are not alone. We are here with about 50 people—there are other Americans.”

Incongruous as it might seem, Rodman, as one of only a handful of Americans with personal access to the North Korean leader, appears to be functioning as something of an unacknowledged go-between, in order to open channels of communication between Washington and Pyongyang. In an apology issued yesterday for his CNN outburst, Rodman explained he had been drinking and was upset because “my dream of basketball diplomacy was quickly falling apart.” For his part, Smith did not spell out who the “other Americans” were, or what they were doing.

The Obama administration has, of course, kept a discrete distance from Rodman’s visits, repeatedly denying any involvement. At the same time, the White House and the State Department have declined to comment on, or criticise, Rodman’s actions, despite the heated media attention. Rodman’s “basketball diplomacy” would seem to be a parody of the “ping pong” diplomacy that preceded the rapprochement between the US and China in 1972. But Rodman’s obvious personal eccentricities do have one great advantage—if his visits turn into a fiasco, he is expendable and any official involvement can be readily denied.

Rodman’s trips can be understood only within the broader context of the Obama administration’s strategy toward North Korea and the region. Over the past four years, Obama has been engaged in a far-reaching “pivot to Asia”—a policy of aggressively undermining Chinese influence in every corner of region and building up military alliances and bases to encircle China.

The Obama administration has employed the same

“carrot and stick” tactics toward North Korea as other so-called “rogue states,” such as Burma and Iran. The US has boosted the sanctions that are strangling the North Korean economy and refused to participate in Beijing-sponsored “six party” talks over North Korea’s nuclear program. Last April, the White House responded to Pyongyang’s bellicose but empty threats, by recklessly winding up the danger of war by dispatching nuclear capable B-2 and B-52 bombers to the Korean Peninsula.

At the same time, Obama has held up the example of Burma as one for North Korea to follow. In other words, if Pyongyang were prepared to move out of the orbit of its long-time ally China, there is the prospect that, like Burma’s military-backed government, it would be welcomed into the US camp as a “developing democracy.”

However, a certain turning point seems to have been reached. Washington’s isolation of North Korea has generated a deep crisis in the Pyongyang regime, demonstrated more clearly by last month’s purge. Significantly, Kim Jong-un’s executed uncle was reportedly the figure in North Korea most closely connected to China. So as far as the US is concerned, there is a certain urgency to feel out the political climate in Pyongyang and exploit the deepening crisis there.

As several commentators have pointed out, Washington lacks established diplomatic channels to Pyongyang—official or unofficial. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in February 2013 that Obama sent two secret diplomatic missions to North Korea in 2012 that failed to establish ties. Speaking to the Asia Society last July, former US ambassador to South Korea, Donald Gregg, described North Korea as “the longest-running failure in the history of American espionage” and urged the Obama administration to “bring them out of their isolation.”

At the same gathering, former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson spoke favourably of Rodman’s visit to North Korea in February and suggested that Rodman, though “unorthodox,” could be used to further US diplomatic aims. Richardson himself toured North Korea in January, with Google executive chairman Eric Schmidt, but unlike Rodman, did not personally meet with Kim Jong-un.

The outcome of the latest Rodman visit is unclear.

Sections of the American political establishment remain opposed to any opening up of ties with North Korea and may well have fanned the media denunciations of Rodman. Richardson joined the public criticism, indicating that the diplomatic ploy could have been a failure. Rodman himself boarded a helicopter to enjoy a stay at a luxury North Korean ski resort.

Whatever else can be said about this strange episode, it does underscore the Obama administration’s determination to resort to any measure as it seeks to aggressively ramp up the pressure on China in every sphere—diplomatic, as well as economic and military.



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