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Tactics For Tough Cookies

What tactics would you use to overcome impasse with a difficult counterpart? What if that opponent was North Korea? Recent negotiations between North Korea and South Korea demonstrate how a combination of smart tactics can bring even the toughest opponent to agreement.

In April 2013, North Korea shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a joint business venture that began nine years ago with South Korea, located in North Korea. The two nations later had seven rounds of negotiations over 133 days to try to reach agreement to reopen it. The first six rounds were mainly a fruitless exercise, writes Jasper Kim in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article entitled “How the Koreas Got to Yes on Kaesong.” South Korea broke the stalemate with a multi-pronged strategy to create trust and cooperation, according to Kim.

First, it made a significant concession, which gave the North an incentive to cooperate. Specifically, Seoul agreed that both Koreas would guarantee the smooth running of Kaesong, instead of leaving this burden to North Korea, as before. The South’s concession invoked the “reciprocity” compliance tactic, which encouraged cooperative behavior from the North.

Second, South Korea revealed a credible walk-away alternative. If no agreement could be reached, South Korea would stop negotiating and would provide insurance payouts to the businesses forced to leave the closed Kaesong complex. Instead of making a threat (subjective and confrontational), the South wisely warned what will happen if agreement is not reached (objective and respectful).

Third, the South set a final deadline on talks by calling the seventh round with North Korea the final one, invoking the “scarcity” compliance tactic. The North did not want to lose what it perceived as its last opportunity to cooperate. Credible deadlines can be a strong motivator.

Fourth, the South timed the last round to occur the day before Liberation Day, when the entire Korean peninsula celebrates its independence from Japanese occupation. By highlighting a common ground the two Koreas shared, the South invoked the “liking” compliance tactic, which helped soften the North’s position. We tend to trust people we perceive as having common values or interests.

These negotiation strategies encouraged cooperation and suppressed antagonism. If they can work against North Korea, they can work against your tough opponent.