

## Negotiating NK peace treaty

Doug Bandow

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The Korean War ended more than 62 years ago, but not really. The warring parties only agreed to an armistice. Technically everyone still is at war.

Of course, no one wants to start fighting again. Not even the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which would lose badly since its erstwhile ally China wouldn't again intervene to save the North.

Indeed, North Korea has proposed negotiations over a formal peace treaty. In October Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong used the UN as a platform to urge the U.S. and DPRK to agree to a treaty ending the conflict.

In the past Pyongyang's proposals appeared pro forma. But now could be different. Cha Du-hyeogn, national security adviser to the previous South Korean president, suggested that North Korea might be "serious about holding a conversation with U.S."

Washington's official position is that a peace treaty is possible only when the North "takes irreversible steps toward denuclearization." Which likely is never. Instead, the Obama administration should respond yes, proposing a time and place. Let the talks begin.

Of course, no one should have any illusions about how smoothly such a process is likely to go. Nevertheless, the advantages of talking are several.

First, the status quo benefits no one, especially the U.S. America is greatly concerned about the DPRK, but only because Washington still is involved in the peninsula as a potential combatant defending the South.

The U.S. had geopolitical and security reasons growing out of the Cold War to intervene in 1953. It has no such reasons today.

Second, Pyongyang is better behaved when involved in negotiations. Exactly why is hard to fathom. After all, preparing to fight in order to talk seems a bit odd. But the mere act of negotiating seems to reduce the likelihood of military confrontation.

Third, formally ending America's role in a war that occurred decades ago would naturally lead to U.S. discussions with South Korea about turning its defense over to the Republic of Korea. The ROK's many advantages, starting with an economy some 40 times as big as that of the North, a population twice as large, and a far stronger international presence, make it time to reconsider

America's security guarantee and military garrison.

Fourth, engaging the DPRK would satisfy a key Chinese suggestion (approaching demand): reduce the threat environment facing the North, which, assumes Beijing, is driving North Korea to develop nuclear weapons. There's almost certainly more to Pyongyang's program. Nevertheless, the North is unlikely to disarm so long as it perceives itself at war with the U.S.

Fifth, by engaging the DPRK, whatever the consequences, Washington could push Beijing to apply real pressure on North Korea to at least moderate its behavior if not disarm. Negotiations with Pyongyang would offer a practical test of the North's intentions. In any case, if Washington acts on the PRC's proposal, the former can ask Beijing for assistance in return.

Sixth, formally ending the war simply makes sense. The armistice, signed on June 27, 1953, was intended to "insure a complete cessation of hostilities ... until a final peaceful settlement is achieved." It hasn't worked perfectly, with sporadic flare-ups. Nevertheless, broadly speaking peace has survived. After 62 years it is time to turn the "temporary" armistice into a permanent treaty.

What are the arguments against doing so? One is that the North wants to leave the South on the side, like an illegitimate puppet of Washington. America should inform Pyongyang that the latter won't get very far without engaging South Korea, which is a treaty ally of the U.S. Anyway, with its greater economic and other advantages, the ROK could easily overmatch North Korea militarily even without American support.

The second objection is that Pyongyang is unlikely to live up to any agreement. However, through three generations the Kim dynasty has followed the armistice's essentials, no full-scale war. That isn't likely to change.

Moreover, Kim Jong-un has emphasized economic development as a broader, wealthier elite has developed. He therefore has more incentive to stabilize his nation. The PRC might be able to help ensure that a peace treaty ends up acting like a peace treaty.

In the long-run North Korea might abandon its nuclear weapons, satisfying the Obama administration's condition for negotiating. But as Lord John Maynard Keynes famously observed, in the long-run we are all dead.

Pyongyang says it wants to negotiate a peace treaty. Let's negotiate. The worst that can happen is nothing. Maybe, just maybe, something positive might occur. But it won't if we don't try.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He also is the author of "Tripwire: Korea and Foreign Policy in a Changed World." He can be reached at ChessSet@aol.com.*