

## Let Americans Visit North Korea Now

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North Korea is changing. That doesn't mean Kim Jong-un is mimicking Mikhail Gorbachev or even Deng Xiaoping, at least not yet. But it does increasingly appear that Kim intends to chart a more moderate course for his nation—that is, make it less threatening, though not more democratic.

The U.S. should help Kim pull his country back from seven decades of confrontation. Kim's apparent reasonableness may turn out to be fake, but it is in Washington's interest to create positive incentives for the North. If President Donald Trump can do it right—imagine a White House signing ceremony for a peace treaty with Kim, China's Xi Jinping, and South Korea's Moon Jae-in—a Nobel Peace Prize might just be within reach.

Of course, good policy is critical. The supreme leader is a ruthless survivor who appears to have eliminated all serious domestic rivals. He is unlikely to turn over his nuclear weapons up front, sacrificing his leverage in the hope that Washington, where the president's national security advisor has counseled war, will join him in a Kumbaya songfest. And even if he does make other worthwhile concessions that reduce the risk of conflict in Northeast Asia, he may want to keep a few of his nukes.

But more diplomacy is necessary. Kim has expressed his desire for contact with Americans. The Trump administration should give it to him, starting with a repeal of the ban on travel to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Even before the Kim-Trump summit, the supreme leader was quoted by South Koreans as saying: "If we meet often and build trust with the United States, and if an end to the war and nonaggression are promised, why would we live in difficulty with nuclear weapons?" Moreover, the short summit communique was structured to reflect this perspective: the two governments would first "establish new U.S.-DPRK relations" reflecting a mutual desire "for peace and prosperity." Next they would "build a lasting and stable peace regime." Then they would work towards denuclearization, however defined.

Which makes sense. Assume that Kim is serious about improved ties with the U.S. and improving his standing worldwide. Further assume that he is open to the idea of at least curbing or even eliminating his nuclear ambitions. Then he has to trust that Washington won't follow its policy in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, and pursue regime change. The case of Libya is particularly chastening. At the time of its civil war, the DPRK blamed the old fool Moammar Gaddafi for giving up his missiles and nukes, which allowed him to be driven from power the moment the U.S. and Europe had an opportunity.

If anything could generate both shared interest and trust, it would be creating a relationship characterized not just by official meetings, but even more human contacts. If Americans and other foreigners are visiting the North, investing in and trading with North Korean entities, staging cultural and sporting events, and more, U.S. bombers are less likely to pay a hostile visit to Pyongyang. The starting point for such an approach should be to eliminate the dual travel ban imposed on the DPRK.

Right now, North Koreans cannot come to America and Americans cannot go to North Korea. The latter matters most, having ended a tourist trade involving around 1,000 U.S. visitors annually, and hindering everyone else from aid workers to journalists seeking to go to the North. Exemptions for visiting the North are available, but representatives of NGOs with whom I've spoken indicate that the approval process remains both bureaucratic and uncertain.

The other half of the ban is almost entirely symbolic, intended mainly to demonstrate that the Muslim "travel ban" is, well, not a *Muslim* travel ban. Other than DPRK officials, the only North Koreans likely to hop on a plane to America are defectors. And they should be welcomed.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo extended the prohibition another year on September 1, for no obvious reason other than the fact he could do so. It was an extraordinarily foolish step, given Kim's evident desire to improve trust. If the president believes that the supreme leader is prepared to disarm, he should listen to Kim's conditions and encourage expanded private ties.

Moreover, every American who visits the North helps pry open another door or window into the Hermit Kingdom. Indeed, that nickname no longer really applies to the DPRK. The country is more open, elites are enjoying greater prosperity, market incentives are present throughout the economy, threats of war have disappeared from the regime's lexicon, Kim has dramatically stepped out onto the international stage, and America no longer is the domestic demon du jour.

The excuse for last year's prohibition was the horrific plight of Virginia college student Otto Warmbier, who was in a comatose state when he was returned from North Korean custody—he was taken off life support and died shortly after—and conveniently forgotten this year when Trump shifted strategies. Warmbier did not deserve whatever happened to him, but the best evidence, attested to by his doctors and the coroner who examined his body, was that he was not beaten. In fact, it was in the North's interest to keep him alive. (There is still no official explanation for his brain damage, however.)

But Pyongyang does not just kidnap Americans. The 17 detained over the last couple decades all "did something," as the head of a U.S. NGO told me while I was visiting the North last year. That is, every one of them fell afoul of DPRK rules, several by evangelizing. Of course, what they did should not be crimes, but in that the North is not alone. Show up in, say, Pakistan and tell people what you think of the prophet Mohammed: the result might be deadly.

Anyway, given the North's strong push for respectability, no repeat is likely. Even more important than visitors are aid workers, journalists, businessmen and women, and others who can demonstrate the benefits of international contact. With Kim apparently interested in a more respectable foreign role, the Trump administration should enlist other Americans to set forth a vision of a well-connected and well-rewarded DPRK. Maybe Kim is not serious, but the U.S. should proceed on the assumption that he is. The cost of doing so is small while the benefits of success would be great.

And Washington should not stop there. Political relations should be made formal. It is time for diplomatic recognition. This step should be treated as communication rather than reward. Imagine the Cold War, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, without any reliable channels between the two governments. Or what if the U.S. and the People's Republic of China had been in contact as allied forces neared the Yalu in late 1950? Washington and Beijing might have found a modus vivendi to avoid war.

Washington could start small, with an offer of consular relations. The administration could insist that ensuing discussions be wide-ranging, including not only denuclearization but human rights. Such ties would also provide a channel for dealing with errant American tourists. In this way providing Pyongyang with something it values would enable the U.S. to push forward on topics uncomfortable for the Kim regime. Positive movement would justify fully normal ties. There is very little downside to treating the North like most other nations.

Establishing these kinds of relationships would lead naturally to the next step in the U.S.-DPRK summit statement: creating a peace regime. Most obvious would be a peace treaty to end what remains a formal state of war. One criticism is that such a pact would benefit the North, yet all parties should desire an end to hostilities. If Pyongyang is not serious, that will be obvious in its behavior. The fact that Washington and Moscow are formally at peace has not stopped the U.S. from conducting a quasi-containment/Cold War strategy against Russia.

The second complaint is that the South might respond to a peace treaty by evicting U.S. troops and ending the alliance. Yet Washington's defense commitment and troop deployment are means to an end, not ends themselves. The Republic of Korea enjoys overwhelming advantages compared to the DPRK and is capable of defending itself. America should take the lead in shifting defense responsibility to South Koreans. A peace treaty would help formalize such a step.

No one knows how the president's North Korean gambit will turn out. But he deserves credit for upending conventional wisdom and making peace at least seem possible. Much needs to be done. However, a good start would be for the administration to encourage contacts between peoples as well as governments. There is no guarantee of success. But having moved this far, the president should push the bilateral relationship to the next level.

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