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After 65 years, U.S. and North Korea should end state of war

Doug Badow

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It has been decades since bombs fell and bullets flew on the Korean peninsula. Yet the U.S., China, North Korea, and South Korea still technically are at war. The Korean War ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty.

The time is long overdue for the “combatants” to declare a state of peace.

Until now formally ending the war might have seemed premature. Despite Pyongyang’s sometimes pacific protestations, it didn’t seem like the North Korean leadership actually wanted peace.

Everything changed this year. Although the Trump-Kim summit was the highlight, there was much more.

North Korea recently ended its anti-American propaganda. For 70 years Washington and its “puppets” in the ROK were the primary enemies used to rally North Koreans behind the regime. Now Kim Jong-un has implicitly declared that peace reigns on the peninsula.

Recognizing changing reality is a good reason to formally make peace, but there is a better one: encouraging movement toward denuclearization.

Kim appears to be different than his predecessors. He is more committed to economic reform and comfortable with the international spotlight than his father and grandfather. In a first, he at least wants the DPRK to appear non-threatening.

If denuclearization is really possible, it still won’t be easy. Pyongyang won’t give away anything for free and Kim understandably wants assurances.

Before the summit Kim said nukes wouldn’t be necessary if the U.S. and DPRK had a relationship and lots of contact. The short statement agreed to at the summit put denuclearization last, after establishing “new U.S.-DPRK relations” and building “a lasting and stable peace regime.” Kim almost certainly expects to proceed in that order.

The administration should seek to accelerate the process, first ending the dual travel ban, on Americans going to North Korea and North Koreans coming to America. Dropping the

prohibition would indicate the end of what the North Koreans routinely term America's "hostile policy."

Moreover, the administration should propose elimination of today's formal state of war. Pyongyang long pushed to create "a peace regime." Some Washington policymakers fear that a formal peace treaty would be viewed as a concession, but the U.S. and South Korea no less than the DPRK have an interest in peace. Even something less formal than a formal treaty would be helpful: The North suggested a declaration ending the war.

While costing little, creating a formal agreement or treaty would reinforce the Kim government's retreat from confrontation. This approach also would help maintain cooperation with South Korea, which has agreed with the North to replace the armistice with a permanent peace accord.

Even more important, though, would be to advance Washington's denuclearization agenda. Kim is more likely to comply if the rest of the agreement also is fulfilled. And that means ending the peninsula's state of war.

By meeting Kim, the president created new opportunities to encourage stability and peace in Northeast Asia. Despite the uncertainties and risks, he should press forward, which means building the sort of relationship and treaty that might help bring North Korea in from the cold.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.