



Trump and Kim Gotta Have Faith

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S. President Donald Trump and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un have agreed to a second summit, in Vietnam. Like their meeting last year in Singapore, this second summit between Trump and Kim undoubtedly will yield some stunning photo-ops. Serious progress is less likely. But modest steps can be taken that aid the detente between their two countries—and stave off the horrifying prospect of war.

The two leaders have radically different expectations. The U.S. president appears to have believed, at least until recently, that Kim was going to hand over his nuclear weapons before receiving anything substantive in return. Kim insisted that Washington improve the bilateral relationship and create a peaceful atmosphere on the Korean Peninsula before denuclearization proceeds. Despite the planned second meeting, if the president and the supreme leader do not come to a common understanding, they risk a collapse in their relationship. In that case, the United States and North Korea could find themselves back to 2017, tossing insults and threats at each other—and planning for war in the background.

Whether the North ever was serious about negotiating away its nuclear potential is unclear, but the possibility of full denuclearization fell to near zero once North Korea began producing weapons. Few analysts believe Kim ultimately will yield his arsenal, even though Trump and South Korean officials insist that he is committed to doing so.

Given what it sees as Pyongyang's past faithlessness, Washington wants denuclearization before lifting sanctions. The administration sees such pressure as critical in forcing North Korea to negotiate. In the U.S. view, nothing can be taken on trust given the outcome of past negotiations.

In turn, Pyongyang wants progress on the bilateral relationship before giving up its nuclear weapons, and hence its leverage. From its perspective, only a fool would first disarm, leaving the country at the mercy of the United States—which turned on Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi, the last foreign leader to voluntarily abandon his nuclear and missile programs—and the current administration, which includes high officials such as National Security Advisor John Bolton, who publicly advocated war against North Korea.

The result was a “stalemate,” in the words of a North Korean diplomat with whom I recently spoke, which led to canceled meetings, fruitless talks, and occasional threats. In his New Year's address, Kim warned that should his nation's negotiations with the U.S. fail, he might take a different path, “a new way for defending the sovereignty of the country.” The diplomat

emphasized the same point, that his government was increasingly frustrated and would consider alternative policies—without specifying what they might be. Yet as planning proceeded for a second summit, there was no public progress toward breaking the impasse.

However, there have been recent hints that Washington is prepared to be more flexible. One way to move forward would be to start small and seek to implement the June 2018 summit declaration. If Trump believes the North in fact is willing to disarm, then he should take seriously the conditions set by Pyongyang. The North Korean diplomat I spoke with called the three steps “sequential.” The first is “to establish new U.S.–DPRK relations in accordance with the desire of the peoples of the two countries for peace and prosperity.”

Fulfilling this provision has the advantage of being simple and cheap, allowing Washington to engage Pyongyang in advance of denuclearization.

Building a relationship obviously will take time, frustrating the Trump administration’s desire for a quick win. However, the president recently seemed to scale back his expectations. And in the North’s view, some effort in this direction is necessary to trigger the denuclearization process.

Moreover, giving Kim what he wants—an improved relationship—is not much of a concession, because economic sanctions would remain on the North. And the increased contact would be beneficial on its own terms, prying a country some have referred to as the Hermit Kingdom open a bit more. The result would give more North Koreans more contact with foreigners, create a bigger window for Westerners into the long closed-off country, and expand diplomatic dialogue that could reduce the potential for dangerous misunderstandings.

Even before the summit, South Koreans quoted Kim as indicating that he saw additional meetings between the United States and North Korea as one measure of improved relations. Indeed, the inter-Korean liaison that has only been running since September 2018 had hosted 285 sessions by the end of the year. A few of them were at the vice ministerial and ministerial levels. Most covered practical issues arising out of inter-Korean projects. Washington should expand contacts with Pyongyang. Most dramatically, the United States could establish diplomatic relations with the North, which would acknowledge that the existence of the Democratic People’s Republic is a reality. After all, Washington eventually abandoned its attempts at isolation and recognized the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Even a more limited liaison office, as suggested by some, would be helpful.

Contact need not be limited to official meetings. The North Korean diplomat I spoke to suggested cultural and other exchanges. Humanitarian aid is another important activity that affects both sides. One of the most powerful forms of international human interaction globally is tourism. Although few North Koreans wander the world, some 5,000 Westerners visited the North annually, about a fifth of them American, before the Trump administration banned travel as of Sept. 1, 2017. (Far more Chinese, in excess of 200,000, visited North Korea last year, usually on short hops over the border.)

The nominal justification for prohibiting Americans from going to North Korea was the case of the student Otto Warmbier, who died shortly after his release from a North Korean prison earlier that year. What happened to him was atrocious, but his case appears to be unique. Americans are worth far more to Pyongyang alive than dead. No one knows what happened to him—neither his

doctors nor the coroner found evidence of torture, leading some observers to suggest an allergic reaction. In fact, the risk to Americans visiting the North has been no greater than the risks to those traveling to a number of other countries.

Most likely, the Trump administration used Warmbier's death as an excuse to further ratchet up pressure on Pyongyang (which the State Department denies). However, American tourists don't spend much money when visiting the North. Even more bizarre is the last iteration of the U.S. administration's infamous travel ban directed against visitors from Middle Eastern and African nations, which added North Korea, probably in an attempt to demonstrate that the measure was not directed at Muslims. Only North Korean defectors and officials visited the United States; there was no logical reason to bar either group.

Even the administration appears to be reconsidering the ban, which was renewed last September. Waivers are available, but early last year nongovernmental organizations complained that approvals could take up to two months. Recently, the State Department rejected proposed trips by several groups. One such application was from Linda Lewis, the director of the American Friends Service Committee's North Korea program, who told the *New York Times*, "The travel ban makes it hard to plan and responsibly monitor our projects." Kee Park of the Korean American Medical Association cited similar problems, saying, "The denial of passports for the humanitarian aid workers represents a sharp departure from the stated intent of the travel ban."

America's special North Korean envoy, Stephen Biegun, recently acknowledged the problems caused for humanitarian NGOs and explained that the secretary of state had directed him to "review United States policy on humanitarian assistance provided to the DPRK by private and religious American organizations." He said he would work with NGOs "to discuss how we can better ensure the delivery of appropriate assistance."

In fact, he inadvertently admitted that the ban no longer served a purpose when stating that the administration has "greater confidence about the safety and security of Americans traveling to the DPRK" after an American arrested for entering the North illegally was released in November 2018. He explained: "The government of the DPRK handled the review of the American citizens' expulsion expeditiously and with great discretion and sensitivity through diplomatic channels." Kim's regime is likely to continue this restrained practice at least long as the United States and North Korea are talking.

The Biegun meeting offered hope for change. Apparently State promised to work with the Treasury Department to ease the waiver process for humanitarian projects. Biegun said the former would take a more "expansive" view of exemption requests. One NGO official anonymously told *NK News* that "the presumption is now more towards approval for humanitarian support/engagement, rather than a presumption of denial." However, legal and administration barriers "have not magically disappeared overnight—we still face very intense scrutiny and high administrative/legal burdens for our work."

The ban should be eliminated in full. "Protecting" Americans from going to North Korea while allowing them to venture to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Congo, Nigeria, Venezuela, and more makes no sense. Moreover, the United States loses the benefits that result from additional contacts, formal and informal. Every American who visits undermines official claims made about the West. Sending more Americans does not guarantee a Korea Spring but does help

corrode regime control. The United States should play a long game to keep peace on the peninsula.

Even so, the administration worries about appearances. Biegun said that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insisted such a relaxation was not a concession or “quid pro quo” in a trade with North Korea. Yet Pompeo is looking at the issue incorrectly. Allowing more contact would fulfill one of the commitments made by the U.S. president in Singapore.

No one gains from the current standoff. American and North Korean negotiators have been meeting, and the North’s chief nuclear negotiator, Kim Yong Chol, recently came calling to plan the upcoming summit, and perhaps more. U.S. officials also recently met with South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, who said they were considering possible incentives to offer to North Korea to encourage denuclearization.

So what to do? Start afresh with a new negotiating strategy. Talk about how the two nations could improve relations, expand contacts, and encourage private ties. Spend time discussing issues other than denuclearization. Remove legal barriers to increased private contact, most notably the travel bans both ways. Consider steps to formally end the war, most importantly a peace treaty. Or even a less formal peace declaration, as some have suggested. All of these are of mostly symbolic benefit but nevertheless offer significant evidence of a change in attitude in Washington, and they might help open up North Korea, ever so slightly.

Moving along this path would allow Washington to challenge the North more meaningfully: The United States has fulfilled steps one and two, so how about Pyongyang’s plans to denuclearize? North Korean officials complain that they have taken unilateral measures but seen no reciprocal gestures. The newspaper *Arirang-Meari* cited the North’s “goodwill and generosity, which are excessive at the current state. Now is the time for the U.S. to take action.” Washington could turn that around.

Obviously, North Korean promises should not be taken on faith. However, Kim would be an even greater fool to trust Washington. If there is any hope for denuclearization, it is to convince Pyongyang that Washington will not take advantage of its weakened state. And that is more likely to occur if the United States follows last year’s agreement by improving both the bilateral relationship and multilateral environment.

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