



Lesson for Trump: US must give up something for peace

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Last fall Washington and Pyongyang were exchanging insults and threats. A little over two months ago echoes of "Peace in Our Time" rang out in Singapore as President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un staged a friendly summit.

Now, to the cheer of Neocons who prefer war to compromise and Democrats who care only about discrediting the president, relations between the two countries appear to be rolling backward.

Which demonstrates that the biggest problem with President Trump's diplomatic style is not that it is unorthodox. With the Democratic People's Republic of Korea otherwise guaranteed to create a growing nuclear arsenal capable of hitting the American homeland — at least if the U.S. is unwilling to strike militarily, likely starting the Second Korean War — unorthodox diplomacy probably offered the only hope for success.

The chief challenge facing the president is ignorance. He almost certainly knows nothing about North Korea.

Which may have given rise to President Trump's belief that after receiving a strong handshake and few verbal assurances, the DPRK leader was prepared to give up his nukes. In fact, few Korea specialists believed the North was prepared to yield its nukes.

While Kim Jong-un could reasonably make a deal at the edges — halt missile and nuclear testing, cap the number of weapons, allow some forms of safeguards/inspections, adopt other tension-reduction steps — getting rid of everything was a long-shot under the best of circumstances.

Still, the possibility was there. But if so, it then behooves the president and his aides to pay attention to what Kim actually agreed to.

Contrary to the claims of National Security Adviser John Bolton and others, there is no evidence that Kim agreed to speedily hand over his nuclear arsenal on the basis of trust, expecting nothing in return until he had placed his country naked at America's feet.

What did Kim accept? As has been oft-noted, the U.S. and DPRK always have had a different definition of nuclear disarmament. The two governments look at the issue quite differently.

American policymakers mean CVID, or complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization. Pyongyang looks at U.S. power in the South and beyond the peninsula. The ultimate result might be CVID, but not likely without something more from America.

Moreover, the summit communique set forth what looks to be a logical process for disarmament. That is, the two leaders committed to forge a bilateral relationship, then establish a peace regime, and then achieve denuclearization.

This strategy actually makes sense if you are a small, vulnerable nation facing the global superpower which routinely, even enthusiastically, imposes regime change while being accountable to no one.

Kim knows that verbal guarantees and paper guarantees will not stop American military power. How to overcome Pyongyang's natural reluctance? Create trust, which is most likely to come out of creating a deeper bilateral relationship and peace framework for the peninsula.

If I was Kim I still wouldn't believe American policymakers, but perhaps events would convince him to move forward with denuclearization.

Alas, so far Washington has given the North Koreans little reason to move forward. Of course, the U.S. should not give up everything before getting anything. However, the only realistic strategy is to exchange advantage for advantage.

Kim's initial direct benefits have been small. Beyond that apparently have been broken promises. Alex Ward of Vox reported that the president promised to sign an agreement ending the Korean War, which would be a significant symbolic affirmation that what Pyongyang calls America's "hostile policy" was over. Failing to act raises trust issues and suggests that the administration is not prepared to change course.

The North could be play-acting, of course. I am one of many analysts who would still be saying that denuclearization was unlikely even as the last DPRK nuke was being turned over for destruction.

However, if there is any chance of negotiating away the North's nuclear arsenal, then Washington must convince Kim that he won't be betrayed. And so far the Trump administration

appears to lack not only a strategy but any interest in increasing the North's trust.

President Trump was right to try to jump-start negotiations with North Korea. He should move forward to improve bilateral negotiations and reduce tensions on the peninsula. These are steps worth taking even if denuclearization proves to be pipe dream.

And maybe, just maybe, the president can prove we Korea cynics to be wrong. It's an effort worth making.

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