



## **Korean summits to make us safer**

Doug Bandow

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Last year the Korean Peninsula seemed headed to war. President Donald Trump sounded like his North Korean counterpart: tossing insults and threats with wild abandon.

Now many people believe it is peace in our time. A Nobel Peace Prize has Donald Trump's name on it.

In fact, there are many reasons to doubt that Kim Jong-un will divest his regime of weapons which cost so much to develop and offer unparalleled status and deterrence. The inter-Korean summit offered impressive visuals, but Kim's father met with two South Korean presidents, as well as U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

After those gatherings the expectations were equally high. Then reality intervened, ultimately leading to the first talk of nuclear war in the U.S. since the end of the Cold War.

The great danger of excessive expectations is that they could be followed by claims of betrayal and renewed threats of war by President Donald Trump. While the president's true attitude is difficult to discern, his appointment of two war hawks, Michael Pompeo and John Bolton, is cause for pessimism.

Although it is important to deflate excessive expectations, it is a mistake to underplay the importance of emerging detente between the two Koreas. The possibility of peace and stability in Northeast Asia is far greater today as a result. And that is, or at least should be, the fundamental objective of U.S. policy. Denuclearization is but a means to that end.

First, Kim appears to be much more than a Stalinist caricature. While charm and sociability do not cover his many sins, he appears to be more interested in and capable of engaging South Korea, the U.S., and other nations. Perhaps he imagines himself as a statesman on the international stage.

Second, this Korean summit had a different feel than past meetings. Kim came south, brought his wife, showed spontaneity, joked with Moon, and made statements that his father and grandfather would never have uttered. Kim might not be serious about surrendering his nukes — I'm inclined to believe that he is playing a smart and deep diplomatic game. However, no longer can North Korea's leader be dismissed as nutty and worse.

Third, Kim's positions and remarks suggest that he recognizes policy trade-offs, especially between nuclear and economic developments. Unlike his predecessors, he has implemented serious economic reforms and emphasized education and science, backed by investment and construction, which I witnessed first-hand in Pyongyang last year.

Indeed, Kim recently announced to the Korean Workers' Party that his government had fulfilled its nuclear objectives and thus now could "concentrate" on economic development. Even if he is not willing to abandon nukes entirely, he might be willing to negotiate serious limits that would promote regional stability and peace.

Fourth, he suggested that regular contact with America would obviate the need for nuclear weapons. That indicates the DPRK desires a relationship with the Washington. Such ties would reduce the likelihood of attack and help balance against China and Russia.

Despite spending decades insulting the U.S. and its leaders, Kim is suggesting a very different future. It looks a bit like a Nixon-to-China moment. Even if the DPRK fails to fully disarm, it could have a much better and less confrontational relationship with America, just as Beijing did, despite keeping its nukes.

Fifth, the burgeoning inter-Korean friendship makes war much less likely. President Trump could not, at least without substantial criticism from South Korea, America's other regional allies, and likely Americans as well, cancel the summit or walk out.

He could declare that he was not satisfied with the result. He could insist on serious concessions before lifting or even moderating sanctions. However, he would have trouble convincing anyone that a failure of the talks required a bombing run or two.

Most important, with neither allied support nor a seemingly demented opponent threatening to rain death and destruction down on Americans, President Trump would find it much more difficult to make the case for war domestically. There certainly would seem to be no urgency in such an action. At least in the short-term, even Americans might be more inclined to blame President Trump than Kim for an impasse.

The impending summit is surrounded by enormous uncertainties. Nevertheless, the meeting is an extraordinary opportunity which could end, after 65 years, the threat of renewed hostilities on the Korean Peninsula. That would be a worthy achievement for any administration.

*Doug Bandow (chessset@aol.com) is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea."*