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## **After 65 years, US and North Korea should end state of war**

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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. Kim met three times with China’s Xi Jinping and twice with the Republic of Korea’s Moon Jae-in; the second visit was arranged overnight.

Indeed, Kim apparently has been invited to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin and there is even talk of a summit with Japan’s Shinzo Abe. The North Korean leader appeared to enjoy his stroll in Singapore.

Equally significant, the North 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.

Grant that no one has ever gone broke betting against the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea intransigence. Moreover, the U.S. has given Kim much cause to hold on to his nukes.

The last international pariah to disarm in return for Western expressions of love and affection, Muammar Khadafy, probably wondered in his dying moments why he had trusted the Americans.

Nevertheless, 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—presumably better than those received by Khadafy.

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.”

The administration also could send additional visitors. For instance, a Treasury Department official could discuss how Washington might roll back sanctions—if Pyongyang proceeds with denuclearization. The objective would be to demonstrate to Kim that the administration is prepared to establish significant, positive, and ongoing ties.

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.

Another concern is that agreeing to a peace treaty would reduce international pressure on the North, but that ship has sailed: Kim's transformation from threatening lunatic to serious statesman has transformed South Korean public opinion and led both China and Russia to relax sanctions enforcement.

Finally, some U.S. officials fear such an agreement would reduce the justification for U.S. troops in the Republic of Korea. But why should they remain if peace reigns?

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.

Washington understandably wants to eliminate Pyongyang's leverage at the start of the process, which is why the North's demand for normalization of relations first makes sense. Why give up your ultimate deterrent if you can't trust your long-time enemies?

The DPRK understandably distrusts Washington, which has a disturbing — from other governments' perspectives, anyway — tendency to bomb, invade, and occupy weaker nations. But if the administration signs a peace treaty with Pyongyang North Koreans are more likely to believe that President Trump has no ill intent.

Transforming the peninsula would be advantageous even if the North did not fully disarm. Kim's willingness to denuclearize may be in doubt, but his newly demonstrated desire to participate internationally is not. Creating "a peace regime" might help normalize the North's behavior even if it does not result in disarmament.

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.

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