



3 ways to put the Trump-Kim relationship to good use

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President Trump remains as optimistic as ever about his personal relationship with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Kim wrote a “really beautiful letter,” Trump told reporters Friday, announcing that he expects to meet with the dictator again soon. “In a letter to me sent by [Kim Jong-un], he stated, very nicely, that he would like to meet and start negotiations as soon as the joint [U.S.-South Korea] joint exercise are over,” the president added on Twitter over the weekend. “A nuclear free North Korea will lead to one of the most successful countries in the world!”

The news from North Korea, meanwhile, was rather less hopeful, with Pyongyang complaining about joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises and suggesting it would cut Seoul out of future talks. “Though we are to enter into a dialogue in future as the currents flow in favor of dialogue,” said a Sunday statement from Kim’s government, “[South Korea] had better keep in mind that this dialogue would be held strictly between the DPRK and the [United States], not between the North and the South.”

The temptation here for pundits and policymakers alike is to incessantly analyze Trump and Kim’s personal relationship, an attention shared by the president himself. But if the Trump administration is serious about putting that relationship to real use, it has three immediate tasks.

First, the administration should recognize denuclearization is not a realistic goal, at least not in the near future. Whatever promising noises the Kim regime may make at the negotiating table, the reality is that a nuclear arsenal is integral to Pyongyang’s defense strategy against forcible regime change, by South Korea, the United States, or even China.

We know this because the Kim administration has said so. “History proves that powerful nuclear deterrence serves as the strongest treasure sword for frustrating outsiders' aggression,” a state-run media editorial opined several years ago.

Without nukes, Kim risks sharing the fate of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein or Libya’s Moammar Gadhafi, the article continued, neither of whom could “escape the fate of destruction after being deprived of their foundations of nuclear development and giving up undeclared programs of their own accord.”

North Korea is “forever unreasonable and obstructionist,” explains Doug Bandow, a former special assistant to President Reagan, at “The National Interest,” but “in this case Pyongyang’s position is logical.”

Kim's obstinacy on this issue is not the act of a madman and he will not disarm until he feels he can safely do so without risking external overthrow. Accepting denuclearization as an eventual goal is the only hope for negotiations to achieve anything but frustration in this next round of talks.

Second, the United States should prioritize North-South reconciliation. This would keep Pyongyang from excising South Korea from the diplomatic process. The administration should leverage Seoul even more as negotiations proceed, letting them take the lead in important areas. This should have happened already — allowing diplomacy to rely on a single personal connection is shortsighted — and it would preclude North Korea's efforts to exclude its southern neighbor going forward.

The advantages of centering South Korea in this process are several. Despite decades of separation, Seoul has a cultural closeness to Pyongyang, which America can never replicate. Physical proximity means South Korea also has a far greater interest than any other nation in resolving the problems North Korea poses: It is South Korea, not the United States, that faces total devastation should open conflict resume.

Though peace on the Korean Peninsula certainly benefits the U.S., it is not an existential issue for us as it is for the South. The risks that come with being so close to North Korea serve as a powerful incentive for Seoul to pursue a patient, pragmatic diplomacy, which accepts gradual improvement, avoids unnecessary confrontation and seeks the attainable goal of peace over the unlikely achievement of denuclearization.

Finally, if the Trump-Kim friendship is to be more than a sideshow of international politics, it must be characterized by a legitimate give-and-take instead of the tired Washington playbook, which requires full capitulation before any sanctions are removed. This has produced only failure for the last quarter century.

As Bandow argues, "desire for the perfect," namely "instant full denuclearization," shouldn't "prevent achievement of the good," which is "meaningful limitation of North Korea's nuclear capabilities" and other steps toward peace, domestic liberalization and normalization of North Korea's engagement with the world.

Such steps are possible if the administration is willing to offer Kim real rewards for demonstrable concessions, like freezes or rollbacks on Pyongyang's weapons programs. An intermediate deal, such as a nuclear freeze, is far better than the nothing an all-or-nothing approach is sure to produce.

The United States already so outmatches North Korea militarily that we can remain confident of our security — thanks to conventional deterrence, North Korea wouldn't dare launch an unprovoked attack on the United States. That reality gives us space to maneuver and turn Trump's relationship with Kim into something of lasting value.