



Trump-Kim Jong Un talks shouldn't focus on getting North Korea to give up its nukes

The notion that a limited U.S. role on North Korea will lead to unchecked aggression by Kim Jong Un reflects stale thinking and unwarranted panic.

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President Donald Trump's Korea trip this past weekend was a solid success in terms of showmanship and symbolism. The visual of him shaking hands with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un at the demilitarized zone and being the first sitting U.S. president to enter North Korea was a special highlight. South Korean President Moon Jae-in had to be pleased that his multi-year effort to ease tensions on the peninsula and foster a U.S.-North Korean dialogue seemed to be paying dividends after the collapse of the Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February.

We should not become overly impressed with flashy symbolism, however. U.S. leaders still must confront the unpleasant reality that Pyongyang is unlikely to abandon its modest nuclear capability. Such a deterrent is North Korea's ace in the hole to prevent the United States from contemplating forcible regime change.

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Instead, U.S. leaders must deal with the situation as it is, not as they might wish it would be. North Korea is not going to return to nuclear virginity, whatever the mixture of pressure and incentives it faces. And America's risk exposure in remaining on the front lines militarily in Northeast Asia has become excessive. Washington requires a new policy that reflects both of those insights.

Trump must move beyond summits and their diplomatic atmospherics regarding North Korea and begin to develop a normal relationship with Pyongyang. That includes a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War, establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries and lifting all sanctions on products that do not have a direct military application.

This is needed because effective diplomacy must focus on achievable objectives. Continuing to demand that Pyongyang capitulate and accept total denuclearization is pointless. A settlement that limits North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities is attainable, and it would substantially

reduce the danger of war on the Korean Peninsula — something that would benefit the United States and global community.

After reducing its own tensions with Pyongyang, the U.S. should hand the baton of regional leadership back to where it belongs: in the region. Washington must inform North Korea's neighbors that they now need to assume primary responsibility for containing that country.

The long-standing U.S. security shield protecting its allies in Northeast Asia was relatively low risk until the past few years, since the DPRK had no ability to strike the American homeland. That situation is now changing. U.S. intelligence agencies and independent experts believe that Pyongyang might be able to hit sites on America's West Coast already, and it won't be long before long-range North Korean missiles could reach targets throughout the United States. The balance between benefits and risks for Washington to continue shielding Japan and South Korea is shifting dramatically in an undesirable

It is both odd and unnecessary for the United States, located thousands of miles away, to be in charge of policy toward Pyongyang. East Asian countries that have greater interests at stake should have that task. Those countries, especially Japan and South Korea, are serious military powers that could become even more formidable by boosting their defense spending. South Korea has an economy 40 to 50 times larger than North Korea's, and Japan is the world's No. 3 economic power.

They clearly can afford to build whatever military forces they deem necessary for their security. The provision in Japan's constitution supposedly renouncing war would not be a barrier to more effective action, either. Even previous interpretations of that clause allow for a robust self-defense.

Although Tokyo and Seoul do not possess nuclear weapons, their sizable, sophisticated conventional arsenals would likely deter North Korea. Given China's huge economic and political stake in preserving peace in East Asia, Beijing also has a powerful incentive to restrain its sometimes volatile client. The notion that a more limited, low-key U.S. role in Northeast Asia would lead automatically to a successful North Korean orgy of aggression reflects stale thinking and unwarranted panic.

Alternatively, the current approach only inflames tensions and encourages North Korea to take a more combative posture, given Pyongyang's suspicions about American's planned course of action. Kim Jong Un and his colleagues concluded long ago that Washington will renege on any concessions and eventually try to overthrow their regime. Such suspicions are not unfounded.

North Korean leaders see how the United States has treated non-nuclear adversaries such as Serbia, Iraq and Syria. They especially absorbed the lesson of what the United States did to Libya once Muammar Qaddafi agreed to terminate his nuclear program. They have no desire to leave themselves vulnerable to a similar diplomatic double-cross and forcible regime-change. A nuclear arsenal, even a small one, with a credible delivery system is North Korea's insurance policy. Kim is not likely to relinquish it, whatever hints to the contrary he may offer during negotiations.

Trump administration actions elsewhere in the world have done nothing to allay Pyongyang's wariness. In May 2018, Washington abruptly withdrew from the multilateral agreement to

contain Iran's nuclear program. Worse, following the spike in U.S-Iranian tensions in late June, Trump warned Tehran that if war broke out, it would mean Iran's "obliteration."

Such a dire threat against a non-nuclear power does not create an incentive for Pyongyang to abandon its own deterrent. Instead, Trump's behavior undermines his own policy of trying to rein in North Korea.

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