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Trump Should Test North Korea with the Offer of a Grand Bargain

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When news reports broke that President Trump had agreed to meet with North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Un, reactions in the United States were sharply divided. Some pundits and politicians expressed hope that a summit might defuse the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Others argued that Trump had fallen into a trap and made a foolish concession, giving the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) a diplomatic triumph it had sought unsuccessfully for decades: a prestigious bilateral meeting with a U.S. president. Members of the latter faction breathed an audible sigh of relief when the White House seemed to retreat from the prospect of a summit, returning to the longstanding demand that the DPRK first take "concrete steps" to end its nuclear and missile programs. Subsequent statements, though, appeared to put the meeting back on track.

Demanding North Korean concessions in advance reflects a fundamental flaw in Washington's entire diplomatic strategy to this point regarding the Korea crisis. The U.S. approach emphasizes sticks with little willingness to offer any meaningful carrots. That strategy has proven utterly futile, and it is time to adopt a radically different approach. The Trump administration should offer the DPRK a "grand bargain" in exchange for that country's complete denuclearization. Such an offer is the best (probably the only) chance of resolving an increasingly dangerous situation. It also would be a definitive test of whether Pyongyang would agree to resume a nonnuclear status under any circumstances.

Thus far, the United States has given North Korea virtually no incentive to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. The Trump administration has continued the policy of its predecessors: tightening unilateral economic sanctions and leading the effort to impose harsher international sanctions every time the DPRK conducts a new nuclear or missile test. That strategy has failed for nearly a quarter century. Trump's main innovation has been to escalate the usual warnings and threats if Pyongyang does not comply with Washington's demands. His actions have increased the danger of a miscalculation and the onset of a disastrous second Korean War.

Achieving a grand bargain would require addressing North Korea's longstanding goals and demands. Some of the necessary steps are low-cost, and include actions that the United States should have taken years, if not decades, ago. Washington's initial offer needs to include:

- A peace treaty to replace the 1953 armistice and formally end the state of war on the Peninsula, along with an agreement by the two Korean states for cross recognition;
- U.S. diplomatic recognition of the DPRK, including the establishment of embassies and consulates in both countries;
- A willingness gradually to lift all economic sanctions, except on goods having a direct military application;
- Suspending the annual joint military exercises between U.S. and South Korean forces.

More difficult concessions, but measures that would greatly sweeten the offer, would include:

- Addressing Pyongyang's demand that the United States withdraw all of its military forces from South Korea and phase-out the alliance with Seoul;
- Offering a written guarantee not use force against North Korea as long as Pyongyang refrains from committing acts of aggression.

U.S. negotiators would need to stress that these steps must occur in stages to match Pyongyang's measures to freeze and then dismantle its nuclear and missile programs. The easiest concessions (a peace treaty to end the original Korean War, suspending the annual U.S.-South Korean military exercises, and establishing diplomatic relations) should be implemented first. A partial lifting of sanctions and the conclusion of a bilateral nonaggression pact could follow relatively soon. All of those steps are reversible if the DPRK renege on commitments it made.

If Pyongyang proceeded toward abolition of its menacing programs, the lifting of all remaining sanctions, along with the phased withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, should be the penultimate step. Full and sustained implementation of North Korea's commitments (verified by international inspections) could then culminate with the termination of the U.S. defense treaty with South Korea. Given Seoul's current and potential military capabilities, its alliance with Washington is an obsolete obligation in any case, so that U.S. "concession" is less dramatic than it might appear.

Prospects for success of a grand bargain offer admittedly are slim. For a variety of reasons, the DPRK is unlikely to accept a grand bargain and relinquish its nuclear weapons and missiles. Possession of a credible nuclear deterrent enhances the regime's prestige and gives a small, poor country international influence that it otherwise lacks. North Korea's pathetic economy, increasingly antiquated conventional military, and comic-opera political system certainly provide no foundation for prestige or influence. North Korean leaders also fear that without a nuclear deterrent, they would be vulnerable to another forcible U.S. regime-change war. They noted how Washington treated non-nuclear adversaries Serbia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. They especially drew lessons from the Western assisted overthrow of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi, who had given up his nuclear program in exchange for a promise from the United States and its allies of normal relations.

Nevertheless, offering a grand bargain is worth a try. There is always a slight chance that Kim would be willing to trade his nukes and missiles for the extensive benefits that would flow to his

country. If Pyongyang turned down such a generous offer, we would at least be certain that there is no chance whatsoever that North Korea will be willing to return to nuclear virginity.

Such clarity would be valuable on multiple levels. China has long prodded the United States to negotiate more seriously with the North Korean government. A DPRK rejection of a proposed grand bargain would make it clear to Chinese leaders that Kim's regime was incorrigible and that Beijing might need to take more drastic steps to rein in its loose cannon ally before it triggers a catastrophe on the Peninsula. U.S. policymakers also could formulate policy based on the certainty that Pyongyang is determined to be a nuclear power. Options would include relying on a policy of U.S.-led deterrence to deal with a nuclear-armed DPRK, urging Japan and South Korea to create their own nuclear arsenals to deter and contain their disruptive neighbor, or rolling the dice and incurring the grave risks entailed in taking preventive military action.

One thing is clear. The current strategy of incremental increases in sanctions, making periodic warnings that "all options, including military action are on the table," and issuing a laundry list of demands without offering meaningful concessions, is not working. Proposing a grand bargain would at least bring clarity and might bring a peaceful conclusion to a chronic crisis.

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