



The strange bipartisan push to give North Korea a peace treaty

Anthony Holmes

August 12, 2021

One of more persistently odd proposals bandied around in North Korea diplomacy is offering Pyongyang a peace settlement at the beginning of negotiations. Often referred to as “the peace first approach,” this ranges from a symbolic declaration recognizing that fighting in the Korean War has ended, to a formal peace treaty that the U.S. can offer unilaterally and unconditionally or in trade for some reciprocal North Korean concession.

Like so many things dealing with North Korea, this proposal has it backwards — concessions first, then negotiations. The “peace first” approach assumes the reason North Korea behaves belligerently is that the rest of the world has not acted reliably enough to appease North Korean bellicosity. It is the rest of the world, not North Korea, that is responsible for ending the war.

Support for this diplomatic malpractice crosses the political spectrum. During former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy John Rood’s January 2020 testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Ro Khanna (D-Calif.) praised the idea of a “peace declaration as a first step” in negotiations. In February of this year, the Libertarian CATO Institute approvingly cited the far-left Korea Peace Now! organization in calling for a unilateral U.S. peace declaration.

Advocates argue that North Korea would relish a peace offering because it would be the clearest symbol yet that the United States has no aggressive designs on North Korea. They hope this will start a virtuous cycle of negotiations. North Korea complains about the U.S. “hostile policy,” advocates argue, so we can blunt that criticism by offering a peace agreement front and center as the starting point of negotiations.

In February, I wrote an article for Nikkei critical of the “golden concession” approach to North Korea, of which the “peace first” approach is the natural conclusion when everything else has failed. And this tactic will fail, for three reasons.

First, there is no evidence that North Korea actually wants it, or Pyongyang would have accepted it when it was offered before. In fact, it has rejected concessions covering almost everything the “peace first” advocates assure us North Korea really wants but is too proud to ask for. It is easy to see why. Such a peace agreement would attack the foundations of the state’s civic religion of antagonism toward the outside world. This garrison-state enmity is as woven into the fabric of its institutions, rhetoric and way of life as reverence for the leader. The leader leads because he protects.

Secondly, we have to ask why North Korea would trade substantive concessions for a legally non-binding resolution acknowledging fighting stopped in 1953. If, on the other hand, North Korea were to accept a unilateral legally-binding peace treaty, what possible motive would North Korea have to act in good faith going forward? From Pyongyang’s perspective, the United States handed it the ultimate legal instrument to bludgeon the alliance. China and Russia would waste no time in calling for a UN Security Council Resolution to abolish the United Nations Command and other supporting legal infrastructure. Even though the United States would veto such resolutions, in military terms we would have clearly ceded the initiative to Pyongyang and Beijing.

Finally, the unilateral peace treaty would do nothing to change North Korea’s designs on the entire Peninsula or ameliorate how the rest of the world misinterprets North Korea’s criticism of the U.S. “hostile policy.” To North Korea, U.S. “hostile policy” is an all-encompassing censure of U.S. alliances, security guarantees, the nuclear umbrella and diplomatic power.

Proponents try to square this rhetorical circle by arguing that the 1953 Armistice causes continued militarization because it ended the fighting but not the war. If both sides still believe war could erupt at any second, the argument goes, there will be continued mistrust. So, proponents of “Peace First” apparently practice something approaching an occult textual incantation — war continues because both sides say it does, so if the U.S. unilaterally declares peace there will be peace.

Of course, a negotiated end to the Korean War is a worthwhile enterprise provided it is equitable and honorable — not the one-sided concession to North Korea that is inexplicably en vogue at the moment. We have to face facts here: The world wants a peace agreement with North Korea more than North Korea needs one. That is not a strong foundation for negotiations.