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Peace In Our Time On The Korean Peninsula?

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South Korean officials declared that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is prepared to negotiate with the U.S. over denuclearizing the peninsula and normalizing relations. President Trump declared his policy has worked and he has accepted an invitation to meet North Korea's Kim Jong Un.

The first is good news, if true. But even if true, it is merely the first step to achieving a stable peace in Northeast Asia.

The second is less clear. Any talks are likely to be conducted on North Korea's rather than America's terms. The North's professed willingness to denuclearize may not result in denuclearization.

The South Koreans who met with Kim suggest that peace is in the air. The DPRK wants dialogue and is prepared to denuclearize.

However, so far Kim Jong Un has not spoken. In fact, after Seoul's announcement the Communist Party newspaper justified Pyongyang's possession of nuclear weapons. That may just indicate that Pyongyang intends to strike a hard bargain. But we won't really know the North's position until North Korea's Supreme Leader responds.

Moreover, there's nothing particularly new in Pyongyang's presumed offer to talk. In the past North Korea has engaged the U.S. in a dialogue over denuclearization. But that did not mean the North was willing to abandon its weapons.

The reason there have been no recent official talks is because the Trump administration insisted that the North agree to the main issue beforehand: denuclearization. But indicating a theoretical willingness to disarm is not the same.

For instance, the DPRK apparently says it wants sufficient security guarantees. In the past the North demanded that America end the alliance with the Republic of Korea and withdraw U.S. troops from the region.

Asking for more than Washington would give would not be simple duplicity, though North Korea obviously is capable of such. However, even if a Trump-Kim summit occurs, what rational dictator on Washington's naughty list would trust the Trump administration and its successors?

Every president from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama ousted at least one regime not to America's liking. President Obama even targeted Libya's Muammar Khadafy after the latter negotiated away his nuclear weapons and missiles.

President Trump repudiated the agreement reached between his predecessor and Iran and threatened to unleash "fire and fury" on the North. Kim is unlikely to accept expressions of goodwill and paper guarantees as sufficient.

Finally, Pyongyang long desired talks with America and there even was talk of a summit between Bill Clinton and Kim Jong Il, shortly before the former left office. It appears that Pyongyang has simply repackaged a long-standing objective.

An anonymous Trump administration official insisted that Washington's policy "will not change until we see credible moves toward denuclearization." He also dismissed entering into talks encumbered by "nonstarter conditions" by the DPRK as in the past.

However, the North won't abandon its leverage without receiving something in return. And it can simply move its conditions one step back, from tied to agreeing to negotiate to agreeing to disarm.

Despite such caveats, negotiations offer a way out of today's crisis, with the Trump administration threatening to start the Second Korean War. After having helped keep the peace for 65 years, it would be foolish beyond measure for the administration to risk triggering another massive conflict on the peninsula, especially one that could lead to a nuclear exchange.

The DPRK long has been the land of second-best options. But in advance of a presumed Kim-Trump summit Washington should work with South Korea and Japan to develop a common denuclearization offer for the DPRK and then seek Chinese backing.

Denuclearization should remain Washington's long-term objective, but if the North proves less receptive than South Korea suggests, the U.S. also should pursue other advantageous, if short-term, goals in the meantime, such as freezing North Korean missile and nuclear development. And policymakers should consider creative options if these efforts reach a dead end, as in the past.

Kim's apparent offer to talk and meet with Trump is a gambit in a larger strategy for dealing with America. As such, it may prove to be more opportunity than breakthrough. Still, Trump should pursue the chance to sit down with Kim and search for a peaceful exit from the dangerous policy cul-de-sac into which the administration has driven.

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