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The One Thing Trump Should Ask of Kim Jong Un

By LT. GEN. DAN LEAF | March 21, 2018

Behind closed doors at the White House and at the State Department, staffers are busily preparing for President Donald Trump's historic meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Who knows if the summit will really happen—Kim has yet to RSVP to his own offer of talks—but time is short. To turn this surprising opportunity into a deal, the U.S. will have to make smart decisions on a bevy of key questions. Among them: Where to meet, for how long, what to put on the table going in, and what to expect coming out.

Let's start with where. Trump is a real estate guy, so he knows that a big score starts with location, location, location. Where should this meeting be held? Certainly not in Pyongyang or Washington, D.C.; the summit should occur on neutral ground. Panmunjom on the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea may be technically neutral, but would be a negative, backward-looking backdrop for the gathering. The usual international locations for these sorts of talks are Geneva, or Oslo or even Paris. But a more imaginative choice would be Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. It would be more practical for Kim to travel to Hanoi than to Europe, and the symbolism of meeting in a communist country that reconciled with the United States after decades of hostility would set a positive tone.

Second, shorter is better. A session that lasts a day or more would provide too many opportunities to go down roads the United States and North Korea are not prepared to travel. These two enemies are not going to solve all of their problems in a single session. Better for this initial meeting to last only one or two hours—just long enough for the leaders to meet, exchange pleasantries and agree upon a single, achievable goal.

Third, be confident. To some degree, Trump has already won. Kim made three concessions in suggesting the meeting. He committed to eventual denuclearization, pledged to cease missile and weapons tests, and stated his acceptance of the U.S.-South Korean military exercises. Trump's goal should be to build on those concessions and facilitate further progress in U.S.-DPRK relations and denuclearization.

Fourth, keep expectations low. It's tempting to get caught up in the historical drama of the moment and dream of massive, quick breakthroughs. That would be a mistake. The North Koreans are already taking a big step by even sitting down with leader of the hated United States, let alone by offering concessions. They are not about to roll their nuclear weapons into the room and say, "Here, we're done with these." Kim may very well make some demands of his own, demands that should be viewed with skepticism and caution.

The fifth and final step: Establish a permanent diplomatic presence in each country. This should be Trump's singular goal for the meeting. After all, the United States needs a diplomatic mission in Pyongyang, and should welcome the North Korean office in Washington. For now, these would be liaison offices—not formal diplomatic recognition. The two offices would offer a means for direct communication, through which the two countries can embark on the detailed work required to make real progress on denuclearization. Additionally, the staffs should be tasked with beginning the long process of normalization of relations between the United States and North Korea.

Some will argue that this is a concession to Kim, a dictator who abuses his own people and menaces the world with unhinged threats. That view couldn't be more wrong. Setting up more reliable communications channels is a necessary step to continue moving back from the nuclear brink and change the paradigm on the Korean Peninsula.

Of course, closing this deal with North Korea will require conditions. Kim must understand that the terms of that agreement include continued adherence to his three prior pledges, and further, real progress on denuclearization. Those must be preconditions to any relaxation of sanctions and other measures, with the understanding, as the president tweeted, that the U.S. remains prepared "to go hard in either direction!"