

# U.S.-North Korea summit: Meeting of minds?

By (Ret.) Lt. Gen. Dan Leaf • March 18, 2018

The stunning announcement that President Donald Trump is willing to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un presents an opportunity to pursue a strategy recommended by Retired Adm. Lloyd R. “Joe” Vasey, founder of the Honolulu-based Pacific Forum. Vasey died recently at age 101 and was honored at Punchbowl Memorial Cemetery Friday. Last year, Vasey proposed a comprehensive approach to the North Korea problem that included elements of diplomacy, economic engagement, military deterrence and human rights — and leadership from the U.S. president.

Many see the proposed summit as another trick by the Democratic Peoples’ Republic of North Korea (DPRK), but this moment is different. On March 8, South Korean National Security Adviser Chung stated that Kim has pledged to denuclearize, will conduct no more missile or weapons tests, and understands that military exercises between the United States and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) must continue. All three points are significant departures from North Korean norms.

To make the most of this moment, we need to understand how we got here and consider goals the U.S. should have for this meeting. When Kim came into power in 2011, it seemed like more of the same from North Korea. He consolidated power by eliminating potential enemies. He embarked on a very aggressive program of missile and weapons tests far beyond what his father and grandfather had done, seeking real military capability. Kim appeared to hold the entire United States at risk and put the world on notice that he had to be dealt with.

The 2016 election of Trump changed the dynamics between North Korea and the U.S. Kim and Trump exchanged insults and threats. Many worried that the U.S. president was leading the world to a potential nuclear war. But the harsh rhetoric told Kim that the era of Strategic Patience was over, and the U.S. was embarking on a new approach labeled Maximum Pressure.

This policy included new sanctions on imports and exports, and an important requirement for overseas North Korean workers to return home within 24 months. The DPRK receives approximately \$2 billion annually for the estimated 50,000-100,000 laborers who work in conditions the rest of the world might see as slave labor.

But within North Korea, these overseas jobs are quite lucrative and many pay expensive bribes to get them. Return of these workers, who have seen the outside world, will represent a loss of capital to the state and present a security threat to the government.

When North Korea halted missile tests suddenly in November 2017, it stated: “Now we have finally realised the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force, the cause of building a rocket power.”

It has made progress, but has not demonstrated the combination of missile, guidance and warhead systems needed — much more development and testing is no doubt required. The pause foreshadowed the meeting invitation.

The way ahead is complicated by the departure of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and the time required to confirm a successor.

Trump and the administration must ensure that this meeting actually happens, and will have to rely on the advice of career diplomats. They should urge the White House not to overplay its hand and view cessation of tests and acceptance of military exercises in South Korea as concrete actions sufficient to warrant the summit.

The U.S. must not belittle or embarrass Kim; he has already made concessions and is out on a limb in asking for the meeting.

Both sides must have realistic expectations. The North is not going to surrender its nuclear weapons immediately, and details of a verifiable program of denuclearization cannot be decided in a single session. The singular goal should be establishment of permanent diplomatic presence in both countries. The missions in Pyongyang and Washington, D.C., should open as quickly as possible, with three tasks:

>> First, establish a line for direct communication between the DPRK and the United States.

>> Second, facilitate progress to full denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

>> The third objective should be eventual normalization of U.S.-DPRK relations as long as North Korea continues to abide by the pledges that made the meeting possible.

Pulling back from the nuclear brink and bringing North Korea into the community time. It will require all of the elements Adm. Vasey suggested. It will be worth the

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