US President Donald Trump’s bold decision to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un could change the face of Northeast Asian and global security. Trump had signaled a willingness to negotiate, and Kim has long wanted talks with the US, and the stunning June 12 summit in Singapore could one day lead to a normalization in relations that few imagined, writes Leon V. Sigal. The proof will be long in the making, but the first step is encouraging.

Arranged Marriage Number 3

Can Trump and Kim Work It Out Despite Past Failures?

By Leon V. Sigal
GLOBAL ASIA Feature Essay  Can Trump and Kim Work It Out Despite Past Failures?

IT WAS A RIVETING moment. Two enemies talking for a change. The Singapore summit between US President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong Un of North Korea raised the prospect not only of a Korean Peninsula free of nuclear weapons but also of a strategic realignment in Northeast Asia. In Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s words, it could lead to “a fundamentally different strategic relationship between our two countries.”

Unlike previous US-North Korea agreements, the leaders themselves signed a joint statement this time committing Pyongyang to “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” without spelling out specifics. They pledged to “establish new US-DPRK relations” and “build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.”

The details that have not yet been agreed will be ironed out at follow-on negotiations to commence at the “earliest possible moment” and at a second summit meeting in Washington or Pyongyang.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in deserves praise for bringing Trump and Kim together to exchange vows. Onlookers wondered whether hope would triumph over experience in this arranged marriage, the third try for North Korean rapprochement with the US.

To understand why this third marriage may last where others have failed, it is essential to understand what the North Korean leader was up to. Contrary to speculation about the end of the alliance with South Korea, the abandonment of the nuclear umbrella, the withdrawal of US forces, a Marshall plan, or even written security assurances, what Kim really wants is an end to US enmity.

MONTHS OF WOOGING
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Nor was Trump’s willing engagement as impulsive as critics would have it. During the 2016 campaign, candidate Trump repeatedly talked about negotiating with North Korea, a signal not missed in Pyongyang. Within days of his inauguration, Trump signed off on delivery of a token missile on Sept. 16, 2017, Kim was more。“The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is [at] the behest of the Great Leader [Kim Il Sung] and the Fatherly General [Kim Jong Il] and the prevailing situation,” or, as North Korean diplomats explained it, as long as the “hostile policy” persists. In its decision of May 8, 2016, the Seventh Korean Workers’ Party Congress characterized byungjin as “simultaneously pushing forward economic construction and the building of a nuclear force and boosting a self-defense nuclear force both in quality and quantity as long as the imperialists persist in their nuclear threat and arbitrary practices.” The conditionality of byungjin implies that North Korea might eventually limit its missile and nuclear weapons production. A statement of June 16, 2013, by the National Defense Commission called for “high-level talks between the DPRK and the US authorities to… establish peace and security in the region.” That statement also showed a willingness to accommodate the key US demand: “The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is the behest of our leader” and “must be carried out … without fail.”

That has been the Kims’ aim for 30 years. Throughout the Cold War, Kim Jong Un’s grandfathers, Kim Il Sung, had played China off against the Soviet Union to maintain his freedom to maneuver. In 1988, in anticipation of the Soviet Union’s collapse, he reached out to reconcile with the US, South Korea and Japan in order to avoid over-dependence on China. North Korea’s need has become greater as China’s power has grown.

From Pyongyang’s vantage point, that aim was the basis of the 1994 Agreed Framework that committed Washington to “move toward full normalization of political and economic relations,” or, in plain English, to end enmity. It was also the essence of the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement, which bound Washington and Pyongyang to “respect each other’s sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies,” as well as to “negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula.”

For Washington, the point of these agreements was the abandonment of Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs. Both agreements collapsed, however, when Washington did little to implement its commitment to reconcile and Pyongyang reneged on denuclearization.

What better way for Trump to indicate a readiness to reconcile than to sit down with Kim and say, as Trump has, that he is prepared to negotiate an end to the Korean War and to normalize relations — something his predecessors never did — as well as to suspend joint major military exercises with South Korea?

To understand why this third marriage may last where others have failed, it is essential to understand what the North Korean leader was up to. Contrary to speculation about the end of the alliance with South Korea, the abandonment of the nuclear umbrella, the withdrawal of US forces, a Marshall plan, or even written security assurances, what Kim really wants is an end to US enmity.

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It won’t happen.” by stopping nuclear and missile global asia feature Essay Can trump and kim work it out despite past failures? Year’s Day 2018, Kim said that while “the nuclear weapons research sector and the rocket industry should mass-produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles, the power and reliability of which have already been proved to the full, to give a spur to the efforts for deploying them for action.” Nothing more has been said about mass production since. On New Year’s Day 2018, Kim said that while “the nuclear button is on my office desk all the time,” and that his missiles could target all of America, he nonetheless proposed that North Korea attend the PyeongChang Olympics to “ease the acute military tension” and “create a peaceful environment on the Korean Peninsula.”

A day after Kim’s New Year’s Day speech one year earlier, President-elect Donald Trump tweeted, “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the United States,” adding, “It won’t happen.” By stopping nuclear and missile testing just short of having a proven thermonuclear weapon and an ICBM with a re-entry vehicle capable of delivering it to all of the US, Kim Jong Un has made it possible for Trump to get his wish.

NEXT STEPS
Now that the summit is over, the parties have to follow up by negotiating detailed steps. The first order of business is to induce North Korea to suspend production of fissile material and possibly suspend deployment of intermediate- and intercontinental-range missiles. Remote monitoring may prove of some use, but delaying suspension to negotiate detailed verification would allow time for more plutonium and highly enriched uranium to be produced and more missiles to be fielded in the interim. In return, Washington could issue a declaration, with Seoul and Pyongyang committing to end the Korean War; sanctions under the Trading with the Enemy Act, imposed before the nuclear issue arose, could be relaxed for yet a third time; and energy assistance that was unilaterally halted by South Korea in 2008 could also be resumed.

Verification could be pursued along the lines of a joint document from October 2008, in which North Korea agreed to allow “full access” to “experts of the six parties” with the IAEA “to provide consultancy and assistance” for “safeguards appropriate to non-nuclear-weapons states.” It included records, “personal notebooks” and “interviews with technical personnel,” “forensic measurements of nuclear materials and equipment” and “environmental samples and samples of nuclear waste” at the three declared sites at Yongbyon — the reactor, the reprocessing plant and the fuel fabrication plant. This might suffice to ascertain how much plutonium North Korea had produced, and, if not, Pyongyang also agreed to allow “access, based on mutual consent, to undeclared sites.” This will require further steps to end enmity, including a commitment by Washington to begin a peace process in Korea, take steps toward diplomatic recognition, provide energy aid and allow reciprocal inspections in South Korea.

The chances of persuading North Korea to go beyond another temporary suspension to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs are slim without movement by Washington and Seoul toward political and economic normalization, peace talks for a formal treaty to end the Korean War, and regional security arrangements, among them a nuclear weapon-free zone that would provide a multilateral legal framework for denuclearization.

Whether Kim is willing to keep his pledge to disarm is mere speculation. Sustained diplomatic give-and-take followed by full implementation of commitments is the only way to find out. Dismantling production facilities and disarming will take years. So will convincing steps toward reconciliation. Only then will Kim reveal his willingness to give up his weapons.

Leon V. Sigal is the director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council and author of Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea.