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by JEFFREY SOMMERS – PETER PAIK
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A Blow to Interventionists, as US and North Korea Move Toward Peace

Critics and pundits have been reacting dismissively to President Donald Trump's engagement with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. A few weeks ago Donald Trump was going to start World War III with the Korean peninsula's "Rocket Man," or so observers said. Now, the prospect for peace, which has never been formally codified by treaty with North Korea since 1953, seems to have critics equally vexed and upset.

Yet, hoping for peace to fail in order to prevent Trump from gaining a victory is to engage in precisely the type of behavior his critics accuse him of displaying.

It is premature to determine the ultimate outcome of this meeting between Trump and Kim. But such a meeting is precisely what President Barack Obama suggested doing in 2008. The GOP derided Obama for this proposal, and many Democrats likely scorned it at the time as well, and they certainly are now.

Engaging North Korea is challenging. First, there is the legacy of the war from 1950-53, in which the North was completely bombed into rubble. The end of the Cold War did little to alleviate tensions; indeed, North Korea had nowhere to turn when it suffered a deadly famine in the 1990s that took anywhere from 500,000 to 3.5 million lives in a country with a population of 22 million.

After 9-11, President George W. Bush named North Korea along with Iraq and Iran as the "Axis of Evil." Bush intended to send a strong message to North Korea's then-Supreme Leader Kim Jong-Il. Yet, the elder Kim drew another conclusion, which was to accelerate

development of nuclear weapons in order to prevent regime change. North Korea carried out its first successful test of an atom bomb in October 2006.

The fates of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, executed by hanging, and of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, whose killing and mutilation was filmed by a rebel militia, further fixed in mind the lesson that to protect one's regime it is necessary to possess weapons of mass destruction. After all, Gaddafi unilaterally gave up his chemical and nuclear weapons programs to improve Libya's relations with the West. The uprisings of the Arab Spring, however, led the liberal interventionists in Washington and Europe to back the forces seeking his overthrow.

But, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, according to President Trump, is willing to denuclearize. What might be his reasons for disarming and trusting the US, when doing so led Gaddafi to a bloody and gruesome end? And what are the grounds for trusting North Korea this time, when the arms control agreements of the past have fallen apart?

The current situation hints that conditions in North Korea may have shifted in decisive ways. Much of the population in the North appears to have attained a higher standard of living through illegal or semi-legal trade. Such gains are threatened by US-led sanctions, and the triage measures taken by North Korea in the past may not be as effective in keeping the country afloat. Although North Korea remains in principle a socialist state, nevertheless, the government has built complexes for its citizens to engage in this unofficial commerce.

Second, the US proposal to halt military exercises with South Korea is a goodwill gesture that assuages North Korea's concern for its security and gives neighbors China and Russia greater incentive to cooperate with the US.

Third, Trump's embrace of Obama's 2008 strategy to talk with leaders "hostile" to the US, along with rejection of regime change policies of neoconservatives and liberal interventionists may bring about greater regional stability by reducing the risk of armed conflict, a prospect that China and Russia are certain to welcome along with the two Koreas.

Finally, the administration of Moon Jae-in in South Korea has committed itself to engaging the North, breaking with the hardline stances of the two previous presidents. What should not be expected is for North Korea to dismantle its nuclear industry. Nuclear technology can be used to generate electricity and is a prestige item for the North generally.

In short, neoconservatives and liberal interventionists aside in the United States, there is much to cautiously herald in the current moves by Kim Jong Un and Donald Trump toward peace in North Korea.

Jeffrey Sommers is Professor of Political Economy & Public and Senior Fellow, Institute of World Affairs of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He is Visiting Professor at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga. His book on the Baltics (with Charles Woolfson), is [The Contradictions of Austerity: The Socio-economic Costs of the Neoliberal Baltic Model](#).

Peter Paik is a Professor at the Institute of Humanities at Yonsei University in Seoul; and Comparative Literature and Global Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.