

Time to save face in US-DPRK relations by Rorry Daniels

Rorry Daniels (rorry.daniels@ncafp.org) is the associate project director of the Forum on Asia-Pacific Security at the National Committee on American Foreign Policy where she organizes Track 1.5 and Track II discussions on security issues in Northeast Asia.

The crisis on the Korean Peninsula is escalating and the world is frightened by the bellicose rhetoric from the top leadership on both sides. Many believe that a war of words is harmless because neither side would strike first – the DPRK would refrain from a first offensive move because of the inevitable massive, overwhelming US military response; and the US would need to build a strong case for an imminent attack on Americans or US allies that is near impossible without the DPRK's first move. But both calculations are subject to (mis)interpretation, and this danger is as high as it has been in decades.

Think of the current situation as a balloon. As more hot air is blown into an already tense atmosphere, the larger the balloon gets and the thinner its skin. The thinner the skin, the less likely the balloon can withstand pressure. A half-inflated balloon is difficult to pop; an overinflated one can explode from a passing swipe with a dull pencil. Now we must deflate the balloon or deescalate the war of words that threatens not just the credulity of long-time Korea hands, but the foundation of policy.

The danger of miscommunication and miscalculation is all the more critical because the two sides are not engaging in dialogue that allows rhetoric to be tested, parsed, and interpreted. Even Track II discussions in which many US analysts have participated, while useful, are not sufficient to resolve the current impasse.

Dialogue is not fruitful because both leaders, Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, are obsessed with their own public images. Each side's political legitimacy depends on being seen as an entity to fear and respect. One way to get this fear and respect is by belittling the other, a tactic used by the DPRK's KCNA and official statements for many years. Now that tactic is being used by President Trump, who publically and personally threatens the use of military force while calling Kim, "Little Rocket Man." This is a significant departure from the normal cycle of provocation/escalation to concession/de-escalation with which the DPRK is familiar, and it is occurring when the DPRK's nuclear capabilities are assessed as stronger than ever.

The world needs a long-term solution to the North Korean nuclear issue that is peaceful, comprehensive, and multilateral, and this process will take time. To start, we should deflate the balloon – if not emptying it completely, then at least releasing pressure to avoid an accidental pop.

The key to de-escalation in the short-term is to find a solution that allows both sides to save face. Such a solution could also function as a confidence-building measure to set the stage for a dialogue. One suggestion is a gift exchange between the leaders. Gift exchanges are customary in building relationships with foreign powers and are a form of respectful outreach.

President Trump could send a signed copy of his book, *The Art of the Deal*, to Kim Jong Un. Sending a book on negotiations written by the leader of the United States is a reminder that Trump values his skills as a deal-maker. (It is worth noting that this book has been given to Kim Jong Un previously, by Dennis Rodman, but not officially on behalf of the US government.) It is a gift that is personal, priceless but not expensive. And it acknowledges Kim Jong Un's primacy in a decision to return to negotiations.

If Kim accepts the book, KCNA can describe the motive behind the gift in whatever way it pleases to rationalize de-escalation. It could, for example, say that fear of the North Korean nuclear program made the leader of the free world send tribute. For his part, Trump can claim that he is schooling the inexperienced leader in negotiations and making good on his administration's statements that the US prefers diplomacy to deal with this issue. Both sides save or gain face through these respective interpretations.

North Korea could make a similar gesture. It could start by sending back a reciprocal gift such as a selection of writings by Kim Il-Sung. In doing so, North Korea can say that they are educating the unknowing Americans on the unique qualities of their government.

At minimum, a gift exchange creates an exit from the box that both leaders have drawn around themselves through invective. The goal of such an exchange is to stabilize bilateral relations at a time when both sides want to signal a desire to return to negotiations. Perhaps it could be part of an envoy process that seeks the release of US citizens from North Korean prisons, or otherwise sets the stage for further discussion. These outcomes depend on the will of the leadership on each side to capitalize on the political gains.

A gift exchange is not a substitute for an inclusive negotiation about the North Korean nuclear and missile program that leads to a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula. It is a means to a short-term end – namely reframing bilateral interactions between the US and DPRK to lower the tension, and providing an opportunity for both sides to claim victory without exercising a military option. The gesture undercuts the DPRK's claim of a US "hostile policy," at least symbolically, and it gives pragmatists on both sides room to work toward a comprehensive dialogue.

South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia have their own interests in improving DPRK-US bilateral relations and could help set the stage for such an exchange. China and Russia could be important intermediaries in the gift-exchange process, sounding out Pyongyang on the feasibility of lowering tensions in this manner. South Korea and Japan could lend public support by praising Trump's magnanimity in this attempt to prevent war in Northeast Asia.

Critics will consider a gift exchange an empty gesture, symbolism not action. But without first satisfying the ego of each leader, there is no room for cooperation. Political will for discussion or action on any other topic cannot be built without addressing the mutual distrust between the US and the DPRK.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.

Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.