



## KIM JONG UN'S LONG GAME

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Welcome to North Korean Negotiations 101. North Korea's reaction to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's recent visit to Pyongyang was expected and does not signal the end of the diplomatic process; it just shows us it will be a long and difficult one. On top of dealing with North Korean-style negotiations, President Donald Trump already made important concessions too soon before concrete North Korean denuclearization steps while Kim is playing a long game, looking 40 to 50 years down the road. Trump, on the other hand, seems to be focused on the next 2.5 years, until the next US presidential election in 2020.

A successful diplomatic process will depend on three things: First, whether North Korea agrees to declare all of its nuclear inventory and submit to intrusive verification measures; second, whether all sides can agree on a sequence for denuclearization, security guarantees, and peace; and third, whether President Trump has the political commitment and patience to see this through. If diplomacy fails, and the Trump administration only manages to place a Band-Aid over the problem, the result could be an economically vibrant, nuclear-armed North Korea that enjoys normal relations with Washington.

**Round one, Kim.** The winner of the first round of negotiations in Singapore was undisputedly Kim Jong Un—and by extension, Chinese President Xi Jinping—because Trump revealed Washington's ultimate bargaining card too soon: US troop withdrawal from Korea. Another major summit

success for North Korea was that Trump accepted Pyongyang's decades-old demand that the United States and South Korea cancel their joint military drills. To be sure, the joint drills have been cancelled before, but that was in 1992, before Pyongyang had nuclear weapons and inter-continental ballistic missiles. The longer the soldiers do not train and exercise, the more their readiness declines, and the weaker the rationale becomes for justifying their presence on the peninsula from Pyongyang and Beijing's point of view.

Another win for Pyongyang was that the Singapore Summit Joint Statement fell short of past deals, particularly the October 2000 [US-North Korea Joint Communiqué](#), which charted far more comprehensive ways that Washington and Pyongyang planned to fundamentally improve their relationship, deal with the nuclear and missile problems, and work towards a peace regime. It was clear before the Singapore summit that the two leaders would [not strike a typical nuclear deal](#), but would agree on basic principles and outcomes to lay the groundwork for negotiations. That is, in fact, what happened: Singapore did not produce details on denuclearization, let alone a shared definition. That work remains to be done.

**The toughest round: verification.** With the aim of dazzling the international community, Pyongyang claimed to have taken several denuclearization measures already. It said it has halted nuclear and missile testing, destroyed the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, and [dismantled the missile-engine test facility](#) identified as the Sohae Satellite Launching Ground. The absence of testing does not constitute a genuine denuclearization step, however, because [Kim announced back in January](#) that he had “completed” his “state nuclear force” and will now mass produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles.

Meanwhile the “destruction” of Punggye-ri has already been contested widely, and [commercial satellite imagery revealed by 38 North](#) on June 21 showed “no apparent dismantlement activities at Sohae Engine Test Site as of June 12.” (The destruction of a static missile launch facility would in any case be meaningless because road-mobile launchers enable quick missile launches from various locations.) Neither of the other measures have been

verified by international inspectors, and more fundamentally, all of the claimed measures could be reversed.

The first real test of North Korea's seriousness about denuclearization is yet to come. The Trump administration must convince Pyongyang to declare its nuclear weapons holdings and allow verification of its inventory and subsequent denuclearization steps. During the Six Party Talks, Pyongyang handed over more than 18,000 pages of documents related to its plutonium program, but the multilateral talks broke down in 2008 because of disagreements over a verification protocol. Now, a decade later, declaration and verification will have to be more intrusive and expansive because North Korea has made significant technological advancements on uranium enrichment, nuclear warheads, and long-range ballistic missiles. A team of inspectors from any of the five recognized nuclear weapon states will likely have to be created. Early signs of "sincerity" from North Korea could include verifiably dismantling some fissile material production facilities or allowing inspections of uranium enrichment plants that are currently unknown to the outside world. Washington will have to decide what security and political concessions it is prepared to provide in return for each denuclearization step, without compromising the security of the region.

**Getting the sequence right.** The future of the Korean Peninsula and the regional order will be impacted by decisions made in Pyongyang, Seoul, Washington, and Beijing on key issues. They will have to agree on the order in which critical steps take place, in particular the denuclearization process, security assurances, and the establishment of a peace regime on the Korean peninsula.

It is critical that complete denuclearization be achieved before signing a peace treaty, and that the US-South Korean alliance, which plays a vital role in the stability of the region, remain strong. A premature withdrawal of US troops from South Korea would significantly alter the power dynamic and destabilize the region while doing a disservice to American interests.

**Can Trump go the distance?** Finally, Trump's political commitment and patience will likely be

tested by the duration of the diplomatic process. The long process of concession-for-concession could reveal the Trump administration's true goals: Does the White House wish only to address inter-continental ballistic missiles that are a threat to the United States, or to address Pyongyang's entire nuclear weapons program, which remains a threat to allies South Korea and Japan? The worst-case scenario for Seoul and Tokyo would be if this process results in Pyongyang retaining a limited nuclear arsenal contingent upon forgoing future developments. If that happens, North Korea could virtually become another India (minus democracy): A nuclear-armed country that enjoys economic prosperity, a civil nuclear energy program, and normalized relations with Washington. Another bad outcome, particularly for some circles in Seoul, would be if North Korea does give up nuclear weapons, but in exchange, the United States withdraws all troops from the peninsula, leaving South Korea vulnerable to potential external threats from its neighbors.

The biggest difference today compared to the past 25 years of negotiating with Pyongyang is that Kim Jong Un—the North Korean leader himself—has written his name on this process. The negotiations will experience stumbling blocks, and there will be forces to derail diplomacy along the way. But as risky as the diplomatic process will be, a negotiated settlement is still the best option, provided negotiations are allowed to function properly and a future nuclear deal is implemented fully before either side calls it quits and says "I told you so." This may also be our last diplomatic opportunity to seek a peaceful solution to the North Korean nuclear problem.

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