



## INSIGHTS FROM THE BLACK BOX: WHY DPRK MAY DENUCLEARIZE

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There is great skepticism about North Korea's commitment to denuclearization. But recent changes in its propaganda from longstanding war rhetoric to prioritizing economic development suggest that it may take meaningful actions toward denuclearization that would significantly reduce nuclear threats to the United States and its East Asian allies.

It is easy to believe otherwise. Since the historic summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un, no tangible actions toward denuclearization, such as disclosure of nuclear and missile stockpiles or dismantlement of weapons and relevant facilities, have been taken. Also, intelligence sources allege that North Korea has continued nuclear activities and even advanced its [nuclear](#) and [missile](#) programs. Such allegations appear to vindicate skeptics who argue that Kim's denuclearization pledge is another ploy aimed at winning relief from economic sanctions, weakening the US-South Korea alliance, and ultimately achieving nuclear weapons state status.

While all of the above is possible, there are reasons to think it could be different this time. First, the Kim regime has unprecedentedly declared a will to denuclearize to its own domestic audience. The statements signed in Panmunjom and Singapore where Kim pledged to denuclearize were published internally – this did not happen when similar pledges were made in the 1990s and 2000s. Second, the regime's destruction of nuclear test sites was also reported to the public. Given the Kim regime's previous insistence that nuclear weapons are

insurance for survival, this new messaging marks a surprising change. The regime's explanation for its policy change is that since it has acquired the capability to inflict harm on the United States, it now has the leverage to trade nuclear weapons for a security guarantee from the US and create opportunities for economic development. In Panmunjom back in April, Kim [told](#) Moon Jae-in that "if Washington promises nonaggression, why would we keep nuclear weapons and continue to pay a huge price?" For the first time, North Korea's statements directed internally and externally cohere.

In line with these developments, North Korean internal propaganda on April 20 adopted the unprecedented theme of prioritizing economic expansion above all other concerns. This is not the first time that North Korean propaganda stressed economic development. In 2013, the regime adopted "*byungjin*," the parallel pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic development, to replace the "*songun*" (military-first) policy. However, economic development has never before been the regime's top priority in domestic propaganda. Since April, the government's war rhetoric has subsided and it chose to forego the bombastic military parades seen every June and July in commemoration of the beginning and end of the Korean War.

Thematic changes in North Korea's propaganda suggest Kim may be searching for an alternative source of legitimacy for his rule. Thus far, his legitimacy has derived from his grandfather, Kim Il Sung, who founded the DPRK after a lengthy campaign fighting Japanese forces during World War II. Kim Il Sung's *Juche* ideology prioritized self-reliance and national independence. According to *Juche*, the North Korean leader is a paternal figure that dispenses welfare to his people and protects the country from foreign powers.

Kim Jong Un may believe he has passed the second part of the "*Juche* test." By developing nuclear weapons, he acquired the opportunity to negotiate a security guarantee with the "American imperialists." But what of the first part of the "*Juche* test" – welfare of the North Korean people? As Kim Jong Un fails to provide his people with food and other essential goods, his legitimacy may be undercut. A recent [survey](#) by

the Institute of Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University contains responses from North Korean defectors, who oppose nuclear weapons development and blame their former country's economic hardships on excessive military expenditure.

Concerns over North Korea's economic future and its impact on the regime's legitimacy may have been at work when North Korean media's coverage of the Singapore summit highlighted Kim's commitment to growth through economic cooperation with other countries. Propaganda photos of Kim's night tour of the city plainly showed the brilliant Singapore nightscape, a stark contrast to the pitch-black nights in North Korea, where electricity is conserved after dusk due to chronic power shortages. Kim underlined the divide between the two countries in a statement that indicated he would like to learn from Singapore's journey toward integration into the global economy and becoming a world-class city. Such carefully crafted photo-ops and declarations may signal Kim's tacit acknowledgement that North Korea's autarkic *Juche* model of development in isolation from the global economy can no longer reliably propel the country forward.

North Korea's economy holds promise. Combined with foreign capital and technologies, North Korea's cheap and skilled labor in light manufacturing as well as abundant natural resources, provide the basic elements for a successful economic model, as the Kaesong industrial complex demonstrated. Once sanctions are lifted, the industrial complex will reopen, and there will follow similar projects that will boost North Korea's economy. Former South Korean Minister of Unification Lee Jong Seok [predicted](#) that North Korea can grow as fast as 15 percent annually.

To achieve sanctions relief and economic development, however, North Korea must take meaningful steps toward denuclearization. Widespread concern that Trump would concede too much to North Korea before the latter took tangible steps toward denuclearization turned out to be unfounded, as his administration has recently [extended](#) economic sanctions on North Korea for another year and rejected Pyeongyang's demand that the US lift the "secondary boycott" that punishes third parties conducting business with North Korea so that

the two Koreas could resume economic cooperation in the Kaesong industrial complex. Without US consent, UN sanctions will not be lifted due to its veto power on the Security Council.

It seems likely that the US will only agree to lift sanctions incrementally contingent upon North Korea's progress toward denuclearization. China has called for UN sanctions relief, and South Korea is preparing to help North Korea construct badly needed roads and railways, and develop a potentially shared power grid. However, if evidence emerges that North Korea is cheating again, these long-term projects will be suspended, sanctions will be reintroduced, and North Korea will be back at square one. If China would continue supporting North Korea under these circumstances, it would incur huge reputational costs. In any case, China's intermittent provision of oil has been aimed at warding off a total collapse of the North Korean regime and a subsequent refugee crisis, not the economic development the Kim regime has been advertising to its people. In sum, North Korea's sustainable economic development will require its continued progress toward denuclearization.

But won't economic liberalization induce political liberalization and pose a direct threat to Kim Jong Un's long-term rule? While inevitably a part of the leadership's political calculus, Kim must weigh such possibilities against the status quo, which poses its own threats to his future. At present, the regime has little choice but to condone a black-market that supplements the state's failed attempts at feeding its people. These marketplaces are one of the few, if not only, venues where North Koreans can participate in the gatherings necessary for civil society (or potentially civil disobedience). The black markets also offer South Korean TV shows for sale, shows that leave little doubt as to the abundant wealth enjoyed by North Korea's cousins to the south. Nonetheless, there are reasons to believe that political liberalization will not follow a more open economy. Kim Jong Un envisions for North Korea the type of state-controlled development used to great effect by China and Vietnam. Kim may believe that this type of development, if copied successfully, can enhance rather than diminish prospects for his regime's survival.

It is hard to believe that North Korea will abandon its nuclear insurance policy, and suspicion over the regime's intentions are warranted. But Kim has raised the stakes by selling his people on the idea of a peaceful and prosperous future, with dreams already beginning to take shape as China and South Korea pursue foundational economic cooperation with North Korea. If Kim fails this time around, with the welfare of his people hanging in the balance, the popular backlash could be consequential, making sincere efforts to denuclearize an attractive choice.

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