



KIM JONG UN'S FAILURES COULD BE WASHINGTON'S GAIN

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At North Korea's Eighth Party Congress in January, as state-run media reported ebullience among participants and extolled the virtues of Kim Jong Un's leadership, external news noted a peculiarity: Kim's [admission](#) that almost all sectors of the DPRK's economy failed to meet their objectives. That Kim openly acknowledged such shortcomings during such a major gathering should be taken as tacit [recognition](#) of the ghastly state of the DPRK economy.

Kim's [resurrection](#) of the phrase "Arduous March" during an April 8 conference also hints at the DPRK's difficulties. Food security has become increasingly problematic and, with North Korea [seeing](#) its worst economic performance in two decades, Kim appears to be rolling back steps toward market liberalization.

North Korea has certainly grappled with events beyond the control of its leadership, including the severe summer floods of 2020 and the devastation [wrought](#) by COVID-19. The former [exacerbated](#) an already precarious food situation, while the latter reduced trade across its northern border to a soupçon of its usual volume. However, two issues loom for which Kim cannot escape responsibility: those diplomatic and those economic.

Failures of Diplomacy

Kim played a central role in planning the US-DPRK summits of 2018 and 2019, [extending](#) a direct invitation to then-President Trump and opting for high-level dialogue. He also placed himself in the limelight during summits with his South Korean counterpart.

Not since the Clinton administration had diplomatic relations offered such horizons. Then it was North Korea obtaining US cooperation in the Agreed Framework in 1994 and the Kim Dae-jung-era Sunshine Policy with South Korea (1998-2003). This time, the presidency of Donald Trump promised to be unlike anything before, while South Korea's Moon Jae-in made improvement of North-South relations a foundational piece of his platform.

Initially, it appeared both would pay off: Trump's first summit with Kim in June 2018 ended with the joint [signing](#) of a document that contained rhetoric on a desire for peace, denuclearization, and other commitments to cooperation. Southward, Kim made history by becoming the first North Korean leader to cross into ROK territory.

However, dialogue in both realms fell flat. This began with the abrupt breakdown of the second Trump-Kim summit in February 2019, which ended in accusations from both sides that the other was unreasonable. Trump [stated](#) that the breakdown was due to DPRK demands that sanctions be lifted in their entirety, while North Korea insisted that the DPRK had merely insisted on a partial lifting.

As for inter-Korean dialogue, both parties agreed to several compromises, including one to restore Inter-Korean economic cooperation in the form of joint ventures such as the Kaesong Industrial Region and the Mount Kumgang tourism project. Nevertheless, such tokenism failed to [produce](#) tangible benefits, joint economic projects have yet to resume, and the DPRK's [destruction](#) of the Inter-Korean Liaison Office in 2020 literally and symbolically dismantled a platform for improved inter-Korea relations.

A Miscarriage Five Years in the Making

Kim's nonperformance in the diplomatic arena only compounded the failure of his five-year economic plan—and it was *his* economic plan, as he emphasized his role in the process in a way his father never had. A moribund economy is nothing new for the North, yet some forecast a sea change upon Kim Jong Un's ascent. Having inherited a nascent nuclear weapons program, Kim enunciated his *byongjin* development policy, in which nuclear weapons would provide an environment secure enough to focus on economic development.

Kim [crafted](#) a development plan which included a softening of the collectivization of agricultural policies, a shift from heavy to light industry, and the energetic pursuit of special economic zones. The central authority afforded local governments a relatively free hand in their construction, with collaboration among private enterprises encouraged.

However, Pyongyang recently declared that factories will be [left](#) to their own devices to secure raw materials. The budget report [out of](#) the 2020 Parliamentary session for the first time in DPRK history noted that there had been flaws in the implementation of a national budget. Given the report's modest growth goals for 2020, the state likely experienced significant hurdles in [collecting](#) revenue.

All of this leads back to the Eighth Party Congress. In sharp contrast to his father, Kim Jong Un bears the responsibility for a failure in policy implementation. His [admission](#) of failure at the Congress, therefore, speaks volumes.

Kim's Reckoning

The same is true regarding the foundering of the Trump summits. Perhaps assuming that Trump would be more pliant than then-National Security Advisor John Bolton or then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, it appears Kim sought high-level talks to be in the spotlight. Yet, despite both sides' [claims](#) of a personal rapport, Kim could not turn this to his advantage.

Staking so much on Trump's instincts for deal-making appears an even worse decision following his lost re-election bid. Kim's strategy with the Biden administration remains a mystery, with Pyongyang seemingly refusing diplomatic contact and [welcoming](#) the new US team with a perfunctory missile test in March. In that same month, Biden confirmed his unwillingness to "sit down," shutting the doors on a repeat of the Trump-Kim summitry. Meetings with the South have also failed to produce results, and Kim's positioning as architect of the economic plan ensured that self-exculpation would be an impossibility.

Whether the [reported](#) malcontent among the DPRK's elite is significant enough to alter Kim's behavior is unknown, but as long as he remains unwilling to bargain away nuclear weapons, sanctions will continue to weigh down the North Korean economy.

Amid these failures, the United States may have an opportunity. While the Trump-Kim summits have ended in failure, they exhibited that a break from tradition may open new doors. The Biden administration should begin exploring new paradigms, one being the de facto recognition of the DPRK as a nuclear-armed state. The Administration could negotiate recognition as a jumping-off point to curtailing ballistic adventurism and beginning arms control negotiations. Given the state of its economy and Kim's leadership, Biden might find Pyongyang receptive to agreements it usually would not entertain.

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