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Why North Korea will give up its nukes

By Spencer Kim May 1 at 12:12 PM



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, left, prepares to shake hands with South Korean President Moon Jae-in in the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea. April 27, 2018. (Korea Summit Press/AP)

THEWORLDPOST
BERGGRUEN INSTITUTE  The Washington Post

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SEOUL — I hear it so often. The *most* important thing to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un is regime survival and the *most* important thing to him is his nuclear arsenal. But by historically meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in Friday, Pyongyang has shown what is most important. Nukes are, and always were, subservient to regime well-being.

Kim, who has god-like status among his people, has in effect told them four things:

- 1) The nukes program has served its purpose, and we will stop work on it now.
- 2) All efforts will focus on making you rich, like the Chinese and South Koreans.
- 3) I have started a new era of Korean history by reaching out to the South.
- 4) Our nukes have tamed the Yankees, and now I am going to trade them for permanent security and leverage to make you rich.

Kim cannot now say, “Oops, I misread the situation — let’s go back to being poor but proud with nukes!” He has mounted a tiger and cannot get off without being eaten. He must ride it all the way to his destination.

Let’s give credit where credit is due. First, to U.S. President Donald Trump for his involvement, without which no deal was ever going to be made, and for pushing the maximum pressure campaign. This campaign is aimed at pushing Pyongyang into a corner so it has to choose between regime survival and nukes and has to thus cry uncle by choosing regime survival.

Second, Moon deserves credit for realizing that if he wanted to be “[Nixon to China](#),” he had to first be Nixon by shoring up his right wing domestically and proving to his ally in the White House that he was also an advocate of maximum pressure, all while signaling deftly to Kim that if he ever wanted to make a deal, now is the time.

And finally, let’s give credit to Kim. He was dealt a weak hand. His is the smallest, poorest and least-loved country in Northeast Asia, by far. He faces four existential threats to his regime’s existence, from: the United States (militarily), South Korea (culturally, with the siren song of absorption), internally (a coup could rise from a newly entrepreneurial class if things go too slow or from the masses below if the economy shatters) and China (Chinese high-handedness and Korean prickliness go back millennia).

Regarding China, people who really understand North Korea reference this saying: “When the door is open, they curse America. When the door is closed, they curse China.” It is no different today than in the past. Maximum pressure meant the Chinese maneuvered and positioned themselves as the only lifeline to North Korea — a situation as odious to Pyongyang as it is dangerous. Kim’s uncle was executed under suspicion of some kind of collusion with China; his half-brother was poisoned to death in Malaysia because he was a possible alternative ruler in any China-inspired coup.

What is needed to address all four existential threats? For starters, a peace treaty to forestall any U.S. military adventurism. Second, a relationship with the South that eschews absorption for long-term rapprochement and economic assistance. Third, China-style economic reform that assures Kim’s control of the regime and establishes rapid development as his source of legitimacy instead of resistance against the

U.S. bogeyman. Finally and most importantly, the end of international sanctions and the beginning of economic diversification, to reduce reliance on China and avoid becoming a de facto Chinese province. When he created the “byungjin” (parallel development) policy of pursuing both nuclear missiles and economic development simultaneously, did Kim foresee that he needed the former if he was ever going to have enough bargaining chips for a solution to all four of his threats? If so, he is one smart guy. If not, he is lucky. But planned or not, I give him credit for seeing this opportunity for what it is.

And don't forget, in this “new era” of North-South history, Kim, who is young and faces no elections, will be in charge in the North for decades while he deals with a string of future South Korean presidents. He has the chance, more than any other person, to shape Korea's future.

The exact details and timing may be devilish, and there may be some temporary twists on the road, but Kim will, in the end, trade away his nukes.

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