

# U.S. POLICY AND PYONGYANG'S GAME PLAN: WILL WE ACCEPT A NUCLEAR-ARMED NORTH KOREA?

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Two months after the U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore, there are clear signs that the DPRK does not intend to give up its nuclear weapons program. The failure of the Donald Trump-Kim Jong-un summit to reach a credible denuclearization agreement has now become apparent. A frustrated Trump administration will reportedly soon send Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Pyongyang to again argue the case for denuclearization. His previous visit revealed much about North Korea's intentions, none of it good.

The DPRK is aggressively trying to define the understandings reached in Singapore as about something *other* than denuclearization. Dismissing the growing evidence of Pyongyang's bad faith, the Trump administration has insisted that all is well and that denuclearization is on track—an approach that is both naïve and delusional. And now, North Korea is challenging the American president to make a “bold decision” and reject the findings of the U.S. intelligence community, as he has done on numerous occasions on issues related to Russia.

The president continues to tout the success of his North Korea policy, even as the evidence mounts that Pyongyang is being less than forthcoming on denuclearization. This is a dangerous game. A U.S. policy of “strategic optimism” will increasingly require Washington

to ignore North Korean actions that conflict with the picture the Trump administration is trying to paint. The White House may soon find itself becoming a cheerleader for and defender of a regime that intends to retain its nuclear weapons in order to preserve its existence, threaten its neighbors, deter the United States, and draw Washington into an endless arms control negotiation, thereby legitimizing Pyongyang's possession of nuclear weapons.

The administration's current policy approach is eroding international support for tough measures against the Pyongyang regime and narrowing Washington's options. Kim Jong-un, who is playing a longer, strategic game, understands this and believes that he can have both a better relationship with the United States and keep his nuclear weapons. Barring a change in U.S. policy, he may be right that he can have his cake and eat it too.

The time has come for a radical shift in the U.S. approach. The Trump administration needs a “Plan B” to deal with the probability that Pyongyang is doing what it has done with every previous U.S. administration: exploiting diplomacy and negotiations to buy time. The president should insist that North Korea take immediate, substantial, and irreversible steps toward denuclearization. The time for “window dressing” moves has passed.

For two months, Kim Jong-un has been given a free pass and provided rhetorical “cover” as he has used the Singapore summit to shift the narrative away from denuclearization and toward his goal of gaining acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. The Trump administration has an urgent responsibility to prevent Pyongyang from achieving that goal. The coming days, and in particular Secretary Pompeo’s visit to North Korea, will be a major

test of the administration’s determination to secure the complete denuclearization of North Korea. Failure is not an option.

In this context, this brief provides a series of recommendations that could comprise such a new approach, including steps that the United States should be prepared to take if North Korea cooperates.

## INTRODUCTION

In the two months since President Trump’s summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in June 2018, the failure of that meeting to credibly advance the U.S. goal of a non-nuclear North Korea has become obvious. And thanks to North Korea’s actions and rhetoric, Pyongyang’s determination to retain, and even expand, its nuclear weapons and missile capabilities is clearer than it has ever been.

Faced with the unraveling of his policy, President Trump is reportedly planning to send Secretary of State Pompeo to Pyongyang for a second post-summit visit, despite the embarrassing failure of his July 2018 mission to convince North Korea to accept denuclearization. As Pompeo prepares to travel to Pyongyang, there is little reason to believe he will succeed, but there is every reason to fear that wishful thinking and self-delusion are taking U.S. policy to a dangerous place.

It is time for an urgent policy shift. Toward that end, this paper will assess the outcome of the June 2018 Singapore summit, highlight North Korea’s continued nuclear and missile developments, discuss the critical shortcomings in U.S. policy, and argue that a new approach is essential if Washington is to prevent North Korea from achieving its goal of becoming a permanently nuclear-armed state.

## THE BAD NEWS

The United States is seeking the denuclearization of a country that has enshrined its nuclear-armed status in its constitution, declared it has “completed” the development of its nuclear arsenal and ballistic missile program, and elevated the role of its “national nuclear force” in its self-defense. There is no evidence that the Singapore summit changed this reality and plenty of reason to believe that it hasn’t.

For years, North Korea has said that nuclear weapons are critical to its survival. There is nothing in the North’s recent words or deeds to suggest this judgment has changed.

In speeches this year, Kim Jong-un has stressed the importance of nuclear weapons and missiles, praised the work of his scientists and engineers who work on these programs, and lauded their success in reaching the regime’s goal of developing a nuclear deterrent. On April 20, 2018, Kim told the Korean Workers’ Party Central Committee that the DPRK is now able to focus on economic development and modernization precisely *because* it had achieved its nuclear weapons and missile development targets.<sup>1</sup> In the weeks before the June 2018 summit, a senior Foreign Ministry official declared publicly that the DPRK was a nuclear-weapons power and was prepared to use its weapons against the United States. This reiteration of a long-standing threat was

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1 Bertil Lintner, “No sign yet Kim really intends to denuclearize,” *Asia Times*, April 28, 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/article/no-sign-yet-kim-really-intends-to-denuclearize/>.

made as the U.S. president was contemplating a meeting with Kim Jong-un.

Despite this, and against the advice of many, including reportedly his own advisors, President Trump decided to hold a summit with Kim. He did this knowing that the summit would give Pyongyang something it had sought for decades: the legitimacy and stature that comes from a face-to-face meeting with an American president. President Trump also risked that he might come away from the summit with nothing to show for his efforts, and that North Korea would remain determined to keep its nuclear arsenal.

## PLAYING PYONGYANG'S "DENUCLEARIZATION" GAME?

At the summit, President Trump appeared to accept North Korea's definition of "denuclearization" when he acceded to Kim Jong-un's commitment to the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," an old and familiar phrase to U.S. negotiators. The phrase has never meant "denuclearization" as the United States defines the term. For Pyongyang, it has always meant the end of the U.S. "threat," and even of the U.S.-South Korea alliance itself, as preconditions for ending Pyongyang's nuclear program. As DPRK Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho explained to a group of Americans, when the U.S. "threat" is removed, North Korea will eventually feel more secure and "in 10 or 20 years we will be able to consider denuclearization." Until then, he added, "We will deal with each other as one nuclear state with another," suggesting an arms control negotiation with the United States.

At his post-summit press conference in Singapore and in subsequent comments, President Trump has insisted that North Korea is on the path to denuclearization. In doing so, he has often cited North Korean language (i.e., a commitment to

"denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula") as the basis for his confidence in DPRK intentions.<sup>2</sup>

## THE SINGAPORE SUMMIT AND DIFFERENCES OVER DENUCLEARIZATION

The outcome of the June 2018 summit was ambiguous, lacking in substance, and dangerous. The leaders not only failed to produce a denuclearization agreement, the two sides came away from the meeting still far apart on the meaning of the word "denuclearization." That point was driven home during Secretary of State Pompeo's early-July 2018 visit to Pyongyang.

Faced with growing skepticism about whether Kim Jong-un had actually agreed to denuclearize, Pompeo's mission aimed to put flesh on the bones of what had been discussed in Singapore. In Pyongyang, Pompeo appears to have underscored the U.S. vision of denuclearization, including the need for verification of the end of the North's nuclear program. Pompeo also reportedly raised the issue of a timetable for denuclearization and verification, and the need for an inventory of the North's nuclear materials, weapons, and storage and production facilities.<sup>3</sup> Each of these requirements would be essential to any credible denuclearization agreement. Pyongyang rejected all of them.

After Pompeo's departure, Pyongyang used a Foreign Ministry statement to angrily blast Pompeo for his "unilateral and gangster-like demand for denuclearization"—odd language for a nation that, according to the White House, had agreed to denuclearize.

North Korea also criticized Pompeo for making the same "cancerous" demands for denuclearization that previous U.S. administrations had insisted on.

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2 Author's notes from March 2012 meeting.

3 See Kylie Atwood, "Pompeo says Pyongyang trip is 'seeking to fill in some details' of agreement," *CBS News*, July 6, 2018, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/mike-pompeo-north-korea-letter-donald-trump-jim-jong-un-pyongyang-today-2018-07-06/>; Jessica Donati and Andrew Jeong, "North Korea Denuclearization Talks Uncertain After Pompeo Visit," *The Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/north-korean-denuclearization-talks-uncertain-after-pompeo-visit-1531072498>.

It is particularly telling that North Korea found this highly objectionable.<sup>4</sup>

Significantly, the North Korean statement provided the DPRK's understanding of what had been agreed in Singapore. Pyongyang's interpretation emphasized improving relations, establishing a peace regime, building confidence, and ending the state of war on the peninsula, but not denuclearization. Pyongyang's statement ended with an attempt to go over the head of the secretary of state by appealing directly to President Trump and accusing Pompeo of not adhering to what the president had agreed in Singapore. North Korea repeated this tactic recently, suggesting that Pyongyang saw value in trying to drive a wedge between President Trump and his advisors.<sup>5</sup> North Korea has now doubled down on this gambit. In an extraordinary commentary in the state-run *Rodong Sinmun*, Pyongyang praised President Trump, urged him to reject evidence of the existence a covert North Korean nuclear facility, and suggested that the future success of U.S.-DPRK talks would depend on a "bold" U.S. presidential decision to do so.<sup>6</sup>

The breakdown of Pompeo's talks in Pyongyang over denuclearization highlights the inadequacy of the Singapore summit. In the summit statement, signed by both leaders, Kim Jong-un committed to "work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." Kim was no doubt happy to do this, since the language reflects a long-standing DPRK position that has little to do with denuclearization.

The main thrust of the summit document is the idea of building trust and confidence and a new

bilateral relationship between the United States and the DPRK, including through the establishment of a peace regime. That latter point is particularly important, since Pyongyang almost certainly believes that a peace regime or peace treaty will eliminate the justification for the presence of U.S. forces in the South. Of equal importance is the fact that, for the DPRK, the possibility of denuclearization arises as a result of the establishment of a new relationship with the United States, not the other way around.

As we reflect on the Singapore summit, we still do not know what transpired in the 41-minute, one-on-one meeting between President Trump and Chairman Kim. But the Trump administration has insisted that an agreement on denuclearization was reached and that Pyongyang completely understood U.S. demands and expectations. Secretary Pompeo, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and President Trump, in recent public comments and tweets, have expressed confidence that denuclearization is on track. But the outcome of Secretary Pompeo's July 2018 visit to Pyongyang, and now his need to pay another visit, strongly suggest otherwise.

## THE THREAT REMAINS

Meanwhile, despite President Trump's confident post-summit assertion that the North Korean threat has ended, Pyongyang is enhancing its nuclear and missile capabilities.

Recent reports tell us that North Korea is continuing to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons, as well as the missiles needed to deliver nuclear warheads. Pyongyang is expanding a

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4 "DPRK Foreign Ministry Issues SPOX statement on meeting with U.S. officials," *North Korea Leadership Watch*, July 8, 2018, <http://www.nkleadershipwatch.org/2018/07/08/dprk-foreign-ministry-issues-spox-statement-on-meeting-with-us-officials/>; Gardiner Harris and Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Criticizes 'Gangster-Like' U.S. Attitude After Talks With Mike Pompeo," *The New York Times*, July 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/07/world/asia/mike-pompeo-north-korea-pyongyang.html>.

5 Haejin Choi and David Brunnstrom, "North Korea chides U.S. sanctions pressure on denuclearization process," *Reuters*, August 9, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa/north-korea-chides-u-s-sanctions-pressure-on-denuclearization-process-idUSKBN1KU1M8>.

6 "North Korean state media urges Donald Trump to be 'bold' in following through on denuclearization," *Agence-France Presse*, August 18, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/2160314/north-korean-state-media-urges-donald-trump-be-bold-following>; "Korea-U.S. Relations Cannot Become a Victim of American Domestic Political Infighting," *Rodong Sinmun*, August 18, 2018 (author's translation of headline).

factory that produces solid-fuel missiles capable of striking American allies and U.S. military bases in the western Pacific.<sup>7</sup> Work at the plutonium production reactor at the main nuclear site at Yongbyon is continuing.<sup>8</sup> North Korea may also be using a factory outside of Pyongyang to build new intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) to target the United States.<sup>9</sup> There are also reports that a long-suspected second uranium enrichment facility is operational.<sup>10</sup> And North Korea's foreign minister recently declared that the DPRK does not intend to give up its nuclear weapons expertise.<sup>11</sup> None of this supports the assertion that North Korea is on the road to denuclearization.

## A DANGEROUS GAME

The Trump administration's practice of elevating expectations and ignoring DPRK actions that demonstrate a lack of seriousness about denuclearization is a dangerous game. This approach could seriously undermine support for administration policy when it becomes apparent to the American people that Pyongyang has no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons.

The Trump administration's current approach—let's call it “strategic optimism”—has tried to assure the American people that the nuclear threat the administration was prepared to go to war over only a few months ago has somehow evaporated. This is simply untrue and U.S. defense and intelligence experts have said so. White House rhetoric to the contrary, “peace in our time” is not at hand, while Pyongyang's determination to reunify the Korean Peninsula under its rule is firm, and the DPRK's nuclear ambitions are as strong as ever. No amount of wishful thinking can change that reality.

## NARROWING OPTIONS AND PLAYING KIM JONG-UN'S GAME

As 2018 began, the United States was essentially down to three options to deal with the nuclear threat: military action, reluctant acceptance of a nuclear-armed North Korea, or the application of massive pressure to compel Pyongyang to accept denuclearization. The irony of the Trump administration's approach is that it has all but eliminated one of those options and seriously undermined another.

To the degree the military option was ever serious, it is now off the table. Today, there seems little chance that the American people or our South Korean ally and China would support military action against Pyongyang, particularly in the absence of any grave North Korean provocations.

Meanwhile, the foundation of “maximum pressure” is eroding. The administration's insistence that denuclearization is on track has sapped international enthusiasm for sanctions, even as Washington insists that “maximum pressure” remains the policy. U.S. advocacy of tough measures is also being undercut by the widely perceived ebbing of U.S. international leadership, the administration's aversion to multilateralism and coalition-building, and the decline of U.S. moral authority. Reconstituting an aggressive pressure campaign in light of this will not be easy.

The White House's current policy is painting the administration into a corner. Continued use of rhetoric designed to illustrate a positive picture of DPRK cooperation will increasingly require Washington to ignore North Korean actions that conflict with the image the administration seeks

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7 Scott Neuman, “North Korea Reportedly Expanding Ballistic Missile Production Facility,” *NPR*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/02/625267839/north-korea-reportedly-expanding-ballistic-missile-production-facility>.

8 “North Korea's Nuclear Reactor Center: Testing of Reactor Cooling Systems; Construction of Two New Non-Industrial Buildings,” *38 North*, July 6, 2018, <https://www.38north.org/2018/07/yongbyon070618/>.

9 “North Korea renews work at long-range missile factory, US intelligence officials say,” *The Telegraph*, July 31, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/07/31/north-korea-renews-work-long-range-missile-factory-us-intelligence/>.

10 Ankit Panda, “Exclusive: Revealing Kangson, North Korea's First Covert Uranium Enrichment Site,” *The Diplomat*, July 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/07/exclusive-revealing-kangson-north-koreas-first-covert-uranium-enrichment-site/>.

11 “Pyongyang will not give up nuclear know-how: Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho,” *The Straits Times*, August 11, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/east-asia/pyongyang-will-not-give-up-nuclear-know-how-minister>.

to create. Washington may find itself becoming a cheerleader for and defender of a regime whose goal is to retain nuclear weapons in order to threaten its neighbors, preserve its existence, deter the United States, and draw Washington into an endless arms control negotiation that will effectively legitimize the North's possession of nuclear weapons.

Meanwhile, Pyongyang will no doubt offer up the occasional concession—perhaps closing down another superfluous facility or two—to allow the United States to say it is making progress on denuclearization. Secretary Pompeo can probably expect a small “gift” along these lines when he next visits Pyongyang, but he should be under no illusion that the DPRK has changed its bottom line.

North Korea is playing a longer and more strategic game than the Trump administration. And Pyongyang's goals, as always, are hiding in plain sight. A careful reading of North Korean leader's remarks in 2018, especially his January 1 speech, suggests that he believes he can have better relations with Washington and Seoul, retain his core nuclear weapons capability, and pursue economic development and modernization. Could he be right? If so, Washington will have accepted North Korea, however reluctantly, as a permanently nuclear-armed state.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is a special challenge in offering advice to the current U.S. administration. President Trump is a headstrong leader who values his instincts more than expert advice. His reported aversion to reading briefing materials in preparation for one-on-one meetings with foreign leaders almost guarantees that he will be at a disadvantage in such discussions. And the president's fascination with form over substance and making a media “splash” has obvious drawbacks. In retrospect, the troubling outcome of the June 2018 Singapore summit may have been foreordained by a fundamentally flawed approach to high-stakes diplomacy.

This approach must change, and quickly, if the administration is to bring about Pyongyang's denuclearization. The time for complacency and starry-eyed predictions about Pyongyang's denuclearization is over. The time for rejecting Pyongyang's gamesmanship has arrived, as has the moment to ensure that North Korea understands how serious the United States is about denuclearization.

The administration should now focus on developing a “Plan B” to deal with the probability that North Korea is doing what it has done with every previous U.S. administration: exploiting diplomacy and negotiations to buy time, with the goal being to gain international acceptance of its nuclear weapons program.

At the center of Washington's approach should be an American insistence that North Korea take immediate, substantial, and irreversible steps toward denuclearization. The time for “window dressing” moves and cosmetic diplomacy has passed.

Prior to Secretary Pompeo's Pyongyang visit, the administration should restate publicly its goal—using U.S., not North Korean, language—of achieving the complete, verifiable, and irreversible end of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

During his visit, Pompeo should demand that Pyongyang provide a complete declaration of its nuclear facilities and related capacities, including a detailed inventory of its nuclear weapons and fissile material. Washington should establish a deadline for the provision of this declaration and make clear that Pyongyang's failure to declare covert sites that we are already aware of will have major consequences. The United States should demand immediate access to one or more of those covert sites as evidence of North Korean good faith. U.S. inspectors should also be allowed to visit North Korea's Sohae engine testing facility and the North's Punggye-ri nuclear testing site to determine whether these facilities have been permanently disabled.

Pyongyang should show its good faith by inviting the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to send inspectors and monitors to the DPRK to begin monitoring all declared nuclear facilities. The DPRK should make clear its decision to return to compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and its goal to be a non-nuclear member of the treaty when it has completed its denuclearization.

Secretary Pompeo should insist that he receive a firm commitment from the DPRK to completely end its nuclear weapons program and that the DPRK agree to begin negotiations to draft a detailed timetable for denuclearization. North Korea must agree that verification will be a central component of this denuclearization process, and that both the IAEA and the United States will be part of that verification process.

President Trump should unequivocally and unambiguously reaffirm the U.S. commitment to defend our ROK and Japanese allies. There should be no talk of troop reductions, which have only served to unnerve our allies and give hope to Pyongyang. He should declare that the United States will never sign a peace treaty with a nuclear-armed North Korea, nor will the United States support a declaration of an end to the Korean War until the DPRK has taken major steps toward its complete denuclearization. The president should state publicly that the U.S. goal is and will remain nothing less than the end of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

President Trump should authorize Secretary Pompeo to convey to the North Korean leader that Washington is prepared to begin high-level talks on the steps the United States would be prepared to take as the DPRK fulfills its denuclearization commitments. These steps should include sanctions relief, the removal of restrictions on banking and trade, possible food and technical assistance, and exploratory discussions for a peace treaty to end the Korean War (with the essential caveat that the ROK must be a participant in such discussions). Secretary Pompeo should also be authorized to convey that U.S.-DPRK dialogue should be

conducted between very high-level, personal representatives of the U.S. and North Korean leaders and that the United States is prepared to name a presidential envoy for this purpose.

In conjunction with these steps, the United States should begin urgent consultations with allies, partners, and U.N. Security Council members to assess the state of implementation of international sanctions. Consultations should focus on ensuring that the international community remains vigilant in implementing sanctions, but should also discuss what measures might be taken if Pyongyang is prepared to move quickly to denuclearize. In these consultations, Washington should make clear that the international community must respond strongly if Pyongyang fails to cooperate.

After consulting with Seoul, Pompeo should be authorized to convey to Kim Jong-un that the United States and the ROK are prepared to begin comprehensive military confidence-building talks with the DPRK to reduce tensions and the possibility of confrontation. Such talks could discuss reductions in the scope and/or frequency of military exercises by all three parties. Secretary Pompeo should insist that the DPRK reciprocate U.S.-ROK actions in this area with steps of its own. In this connection, the U.S. should also insist that the DPRK postpone its annual winter training exercise in response to steps that Washington and Seoul have already taken to suspend key bilateral exercises. Implicit in this request should be a warning that the United States and the ROK might be prepared to restart these exercises if Pyongyang does not reciprocate.

Secretary Pompeo should visit both Tokyo and Seoul prior to visiting Pyongyang to hear the views and recommendations of our allies and inform them of his goals for talks in North Korea. It is especially important that Pompeo's visit to Seoul occur *before* the upcoming ROK-DPRK summit so that the Moon Jae-in administration can understand Washington's new approach and how determined the United States is to demand that North Korea take major steps toward denuclearization.

Seoul has consistently given the denuclearization issue a low priority and the ROK needs to know how unhelpful this is. President Moon should also understand Washington's discomfort with the rapid pace of North-South dialogue, which has the potential to erode our shared leverage over North Korea. The ROK should be cautioned not get out ahead of the United States on core issues like a peace declaration or treaty.

Finally, with Pyongyang demonstrating that it is not serious about denuclearization, the Trump administration must act quickly and decisively to test the North Korean leader. There is little time to

waste and delay only serves Pyongyang's interests. For two months, Kim Jong-un has been given a free pass and rhetorical "cover" as he used the Singapore summit to shift the narrative away from denuclearization and toward his goal of gaining acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. The Trump administration has an urgent responsibility to prevent Pyongyang from achieving that goal. The coming days will be a major test of the administration's determination to secure the denuclearization of North Korea. Failure is not an option.



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