
Optimism About Korea Will Kill Us All

Description

The first step towards peace is lowering your expectations.

BY [JEFFREY LEWIS](#) in Foreign Policy

Last week's inter-Korean summit, and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's declaration that he would "close" his nuclear test site by May, were greeted widely with celebration. But contrary to the hoopla, we have now arrived at an especially dangerous moment in Washington's relationship with Pyongyang. We are on the verge of letting our hopes get in the way of our survival.

Consider the now widespread view that North Korea's test site is unusable or that the mountain that contains it has collapsed. This was always garbage reporting. You can download the two [academic papers](#) that are said to have originally made these claims — they say nothing of the kind. What the papers do is prove that, after North Korea's big nuclear test in September 2017, the cavity created by the explosion collapsed in on itself. We already knew that probably happened (although it is cool to see it demonstrated through seismology).

But the collapsing of the cavity and shrinking of the mountain do not mean the tunnels leading to it collapsed, let alone that the mountain itself had done so. And, of course, there are two other nuclear test complexes underneath entirely different mountains at the site. Kim was [quoted](#) as making this point himself: "Some said we will dismantle unusable facilities, but there are two more larger tunnels [in addition to] the original one and these are very in good condition as you will get to know that when coming and seeing them." But commentators in the West, hoping for a diplomatic breakthrough (whether for political or more idealistic reasons), still heard what they wanted to hear about the condition of North Korea's program.

The whole episode reminds me of something that happened a decade ago — when North Korea agreed to demolish the cooling tower at its Yongbyon gas-graphite reactor. The demolition of the cooling tower, accomplished with great fanfare, was not, in fact, a part of the original agreement that the Bush administration had reached with North Korea. But the Bush administration went back and asked North Korea to do it [because it wanted](#) "a striking visual, broadcast around the globe, that would offer tangible evidence that North Korea was retreating from its nuclear ambitions." In other words, it was a PR stunt — and people fell for it.

There was just one problem. Although North Korea never rebuilt the cooling tower, that didn't stop it from it secretly restarting Yongbyon — it simply connected the reactor to a nondescript and very boring pump house it had constructed under everyone's noses. (This was the same sort of pump house, incidentally, that North Korea helped Syria build at its secret nuclear reactor near Al Kibar.) But without the visual of Yongbyon's cooling tower, almost no one noticed what North Korea was doing with the reactor.

Kim's promise to close the nuclear test site doesn't really mean much in practice, certainly not much more than the demolition of the cooling tower. The site is a few support buildings surrounded by mountains with massive tunnel complexes dug horizontally into them. Simply closing the site wouldn't be anything like the disabling of South Africa's nuclear test site, whose vertical shafts were filled with debris. Instead, it would be more like the closure of Degelen Mountain at the Semipalatinsk test site in Kazakhstan, which the United States helped seal after the Soviets had abandoned it. Scavengers eventually just popped open the seals, forcing the United States to reseal them and then add surveillance measures. North Korea can seal up the tunnels, but it could always unseal them later. And we should keep an eye out for the proverbial pump house. After all, it's not like North Korea is short on mountains or labor to dig new tunnels.

This is not to say that I am not delighted that North Korea has announced an end to nuclear explosive testing and the closure of its test site. This is a very good thing. But we must be clear about what's happening and what it means. North Korea isn't giving up a test site because it collapsed. North Korea agreed to stop testing because Kim is getting what he wants. The third inter-Korean summit was not premised on Kim Jong Un offering to disarm. He has never, ever made a concrete promise to abandon his nuclear weapons program. If you read the joint statement closely, what South and North Korea have done is to take disarmament off the table as a concrete outcome and substitute a vague aspiration that at some point nuclear weapons will no longer be necessary.

Until that time, Kim is willing to agree to a much more modest series of steps — a moratorium on launches of intermediate- and intercontinental-range ballistic missiles, as well as an end to nuclear testing. Those are good things. We should appreciate them as genuine improvements to U.S. security, not something to tide the United States over until North Korea turns over missiles and nuclear warheads.

Kim is working toward winning a de facto recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power in exchange for his agreement to respect certain limits — an end to certain missile tests and nuclear explosions, an agreement not to export nuclear technology to other states, and perhaps a pledge by North Korea not to use nuclear weapons. To accept this would represent a complete and total retreat from decades of U.S. policy — a retreat that I believe is overdue and the inevitable consequence of North Korea's development of ICBMs and thermonuclear weapons. We have to learn to accept North Korea as it is. And what North Korea *is*, is nuclear-armed.

But because it represents a retreat, we're not acknowledging it honestly. If Trump were to say this clearly, then I would support the old racist windbag in this pursuit. But instead, Trump and others are presenting this process as a route that leads to North Korea's disarmament — even though Kim has said nothing that deviates from statements that every North Korean leader has made. And in our collective self-delusion, we have a surprising cheerleader: national security advisor John Bolton.

It is worth asking why Bolton is busy giving interviews in which he raises hopes for a complete elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons that can occur in a matter of months. He has repeatedly called for a "Libya style" deal — one in which the United States simply shows up and collects the weapons and supporting infrastructure. And South Korean officials are also [saying](#) that Trump won't meet with Kim without "a specific timeline for complete denuclearization: as soon as possible and no later than the end of Mr. Trump's current term, in early 2021."

This is madness. There is no reason to think that Kim has any intention of agreeing to such a thing. (Starting with the fact that he has never offered to part with North Korea's "powerful treasured sword," as it calls its nuclear arsenal.) And there is no reason to think that Bolton, given all the things he has written and said over the years about North Korea, believes it either. Bolton isn't suddenly naive. He's working an angle. And that angle is almost certainly misaligning the president's expectations. Bolton won't try to kill diplomacy by opposing it. Rather he'll kill it by making the perfect the enemy of the good. By raising the prospects of a Libya-style surrender, the much more modest settlement offered by Kim looks sad by comparison.

This is a very cynical — and dangerous — game that Bolton and others are playing. Because what happens once it becomes clear that Kim is not abandoning his nuclear weapons? What does Trump do? Given his personality, what's most likely is that he'll lash out, blaming his secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, for his role in setting up the fiasco — and turning the keys over to Bolton. Trump has already hinted at that. At a rally the other day, Trump spoke glowingly about his own efforts to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons, before turning dark. "And if I can't do it," Trump [warned](#), "it will be a very tough time for a lot of countries and a lot of people."

That is a mild description for a situation that would expose millions of Koreans, Japanese, and Americans to a heightened risk of nuclear war. If diplomacy fails, it will be a tough time for everyone — everyone except Bolton.

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