

South Korean President Moon's Gamble for Peace With North Korea Has Paid Off

But the diplomatic process will be managed by US and Korean spy agencies.



South Korean President Moon Jae-in is greeted by his supporters in Goyang, May 4, 2017. (AP Photo / Lee Jin-man)

On May 7, 2017, two days before Moon Jae-in's historic election as South Korea's president, I interviewed the former human-rights lawyer after he spoke to a campaign rally in Gwangju, the industrial city in Korea's southwest famous for its 1980 citizens' uprising against a US-backed military government.

Moon had just pledged to 2,000 cheering supporters gathered in front of the city's high-speed rail station to "raise my voice loudly" to ensure that Seoul was in the lead in any dealings with North Korea. This was a reference to President Donald Trump, whose escalating rhetoric against North Korea was frightening Korean voters and had raised tensions in Asia to a boiling point.

As we sat down to talk in the stationmaster's office, I asked Moon about the pundits and officials in Washington who were complaining about his pledge to continue the "Sunshine Policy" of his progressive predecessors, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. Was Moon concerned about predictions that his laser focus on engagement and dialogue with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un would create fissures with the Trump administration and shake up the US-South Korean alliance?

His answer was an emphatic no. "I don't agree," Moon said, his face breaking into a wide smile. "To solve the North Korea nuclear problem is in both our common interests. If South Korea takes an active role, that would be helpful to the United States and would relieve the US burden." Trump, he said, "would also sympathize with my idea and understand me on this issue."

What I witnessed in that interview was the beginning of Moon's months-long effort to seize control over the Korea crisis and turn it into a peace process that would ensure that the Korean people were protected from the outbreak of a second destructive war. Today, it's clear that his gamble has paid off—big time—with one of the biggest political reversals in the history of US foreign policy: Trump's momentous decision—after months of hair-raising confrontation—to meet face to face with the leader of North Korea, an unprecedented step for a sitting US president.

Moon's words that day last spring were "prophetic and right on the mark, and he's done exactly what he said," says Joseph DeTrani, a former CIA analyst who was a US envoy for the "Six-Party Talks" during the Bush administration. Looking back, in an interview with *The Nation*, at the events that led up to Trump's decision to meet with Kim, DeTrani said that "Moon Jae-in has not only taken the lead, he's taken the lead and run with it in a very impressive way. He has handled this brilliantly."

Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, of course, claim that Moon's success is due to the US "maximum pressure" campaign of military threats and sanctions. But that alone would not have brought Kim to the table, says Suzanne DiMaggio, a skilled negotiator with the New America Foundation who has been meeting with North Korean diplomats regularly in what's called the "Track II" process. "The other major factor is the diplomatic heavy lifting and finessing done by President Moon and his colleagues to get us to this point," she said.

The contours of Moon's triumph became clear on March 8, when Chung Eui-yong, his national security adviser, announced on live television at the White House that Trump had accepted an invitation—conveyed by North Korea through Moon's representatives during two days of meetings in Pyongyang—to meet with Kim sometime in May.

As recounted by Chung to the gathered reporters, Kim Jong-un told South Korea that “he is committed to denuclearization. He pledged that North Korea will refrain from any further nuclear or missile tests. He understands that the routine joint military exercises between the Republic of Korea and the United States must continue. And he expressed his eagerness to meet President Trump as soon as possible.” Both South and North Korea were surprised by how quickly Trump accepted the invitation, according to people who have talked to both governments.

South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha affirmed Kim's promises during a visit to Washington this week. Kim Jong-un “has given his word” on discussing denuclearization, she told *Face the Nation* last Sunday. “This is the first time that the words came directly from the North Korean supreme leader himself, and that has never been done before.”

In the end, the deal is very much along the lines of the “freeze for freeze” proposals—outlined in these pages last fall—in which the North would establish the atmosphere for talks by suspending its nuclear and missile tests in exchange for a moratorium or scaling down of the US-South Korea military exercises that Kim Jong-un had denounced as a threat to North Korea's sovereignty and had used to justify his nuclear program.

The Trump administration, however, rejects any notion that it has accepted such a swap. Just after the summit was announced, CIA director Mike Pompeo said that Washington had made no concessions to get the meeting, pointing to the fact Kim has “allowed us to continue our exercises on the peninsula, something that's been fought over for decades.”

That's true, as Kim's guarantees confirmed. But South Korean officials have been saying for weeks that the exercises will be scaled down this year and won't include most of the strategic weapons deployed in the past, such as B-1B bombers or nuclear-powered aircraft carriers.

On Tuesday, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and his South Korean counterpart, Song Young-moo, announced that the first exercises, called Foal Eagle, will begin April 1, but they didn't release any details about timing or how many troops will be mobilized.

Instead, Korean officials, speaking on background in South Korea, confirmed that the exercises will be low-key: According to AP, there are "no immediate plans to bring in American strategic assets." This is clearly a concession, despite Pompeo's denial and the strange decisions by US media not to report the Korean caveats (the contrast between US and South Korean coverage of the exercises is striking).

On Wednesday, meanwhile, North Korea finally acknowledged what it called "a sign of change" in US-North Korean relations, attributing it to "the dramatic atmosphere for reconciliation [that] has been created in relations between the north and the south of Korea," according to official statements quoted in *NK News*. The US press, in contrast, has moved on from the Trump-Kim summit, with even the usual hawkish voices staying quiet. That's left the South Korean media to cover the results of the extraordinary process unfolding in Northeast Asia.

There were several turning points in Moon's quest to place South Korea, as he has said, "in the driver's seat." One came last August, when he bluntly warned Trump against embarking on a unilateral military strike against North Korea, which he and most Koreans know would immediately wreak havoc on the south and throughout the peninsula. "No one shall take a military action on the Korean Peninsula without South Korean consent," he said in an emotional statement.

The other came last December, after North Korea tested its second hydrogen bomb and successfully launched a Hwasong-15 rocket, its most powerful so far, an ICBM capable of hitting targets in the United States. That month, Kim declared that North Korea had completed its "state nuclear force." He then passed word through his diplomats that this meant that North Korea was ready to stop its testing altogether, even before it had succeeded in fitting a nuclear warhead to a missile capable of re-entry into the atmosphere and hitting a target.

"The interesting thing is, they stopped short of completing an ICBM and a reliable thermo-nuclear warhead," says Leon Sigal, a former State Department official and editorial writer for *The New York Times* who wrote a history of the 1994 nuclear crisis called *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea*. In the

deal they've agreed to, he said in an interview, "they've given us a suspension of their nuclear and missile programs, which is not trivial because they were on the cusp of having" a reliable nuclear weapon system, he says. "We got something, and they got something."

Kim's declaration "was a significant achievement in their eyes," DiMaggio told me. "Now they can come to the table with maximum negotiating strength, so the timing for engagement now makes complete sense."

The final step came when the Trump administration dropped its preconditions for talks, which had included a cessation of testing and a prior commitment to denuclearize. That was communicated privately and then publicly shortly before Moon's Olympic diplomacy, said Sigal, who, like DiMaggio, has been a key player in Track II talks with North Korea. "They were ready [to talk] when we dropped our preconditions," he said.

The deal for a summit was supposed to be sealed by a meeting in Seoul between Vice President Mike Pence and his advisers with Kim Yo-jong, Kim's sister, during the Olympics. But Pence's boorish and arrogant behavior convinced the North to cancel two hours before it was to begin. Later, Ivanka Trump was accompanied in a trip to Seoul by Allison Hooker, the director of Korean affairs at the National Security Council, but a scheduled meeting between Hooker and a North Korean deputy never materialized. "That was a missed opportunity on both fronts," said Sigal.

After this, of course, came Moon Jae-in's spectacular diplomacy with Kim Jong-un's representatives in Seoul, and the agreement in Pyongyang for Moon and Kim to hold the third intra-Korean summit in April at the truce village of Panmunjom, to be followed by the unprecedented summit between Kim and Trump. Moon's approval rating among South Koreans is now hovering at 74 percent, "thanks to positive views of his handling of relations with North Korea," the Yonhap News Agency reports.

To be sure, the outcome of any Trump-Kim summit is far from certain and will require an unprecedented system of verification if North Korea does in fact agree to eventually give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for a normal, and peaceful, relationship with the United States. "That's a steep mountain to climb," former Secretary of Defense William Perry, who led US negotiations with North Korea in

the 1990s, told a Washington conference last week.

But DeTrani, who was a nonproliferation expert for the CIA and was involved in verification procedures during the Six-Party Talks, believes such a system is entirely possible if the United States and North Korea can agree that monitors would have access to nuclear facilities, including the scientists and technologists working in them, as well as weapons sites that have not been officially declared. "I really believe that if you could get all those pieces together for North Korea, given what's going on with overhead reconnaissance capabilities and so on, I would think we would probably be able to do a good job," he told me.

Last week, President Trump appeared to throw a monkey wrench into the negotiating process when he fired Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who had been in charge of the administration's diplomatic approach to North Korea, and replaced him with the more hawkish Pompeo. On March 11, even before the switch was announced, Pompeo confirmed that Trump "has indicated he's prepared to go have an initial discussion on this incredibly important topic and we're preparing for that time."

But the CIA chief's assurances were not enough for the media, which reacted to the initial news of a Trump-Kim summit with horror and disbelief. After finally getting used to the idea that Trump was committed and was going, reporters became obsessed about the fact that, a week after Chung's momentous announcement at the White House, North Korea had yet to respond publicly to the offer.

The "silence," the *Times* speculated, citing Jung Park, a former CIA analyst at the Brookings Institution, has "raised suspicions" among experts as to whether Kim "really made the offer." That meme was soon repeated on MSNBC, where North Korea missile analyst Jeffrey Lewis told news-host Chris Hayes that he was suspicious about South Korea's assurances because they were made at a "boozy" meeting in Pyongyang between Moon's representatives and Kim Jong-un.

Sigal, who has extensive contacts on both sides of the DMZ, attributed North Korea's public silence in part to the closure of the "New York channel" this month when Joseph Yun, the US diplomat who has been leading low-level US talks with Pyongyang through its UN Mission in New York, abruptly resigned from his post. The North Koreans "haven't confirmed their position because we haven't sent a

clear message to them of our intent through the working-level New York channel or any other official bilateral channel,” Sigal said. Beyond that, “the press has been utterly uninterested in the negotiating side of the story,” he added. “They love the war story.”

DiMaggio, for her part, doubted that President Moon would risk his reputation and presidency on a false promise he had not confirmed with his northern counterparts. “My sense of how the South Koreans are approaching this is they are being quite cautious and disciplined,” she told me. “I don’t think they would relay any messages that didn’t actually happen.”

On the other hand, she was concerned that Pompeo’s elevation to secretary of state could signal that Trump’s impulses will be given full rein as he prepares to meet with Kim, and could put Moon’s carefully planned diplomatic offensive at risk. “It’s clear he’s skeptical of any diplomatic approach,” she said.

“That, combined with his lack of negotiating experience, points to what I would call rough waters ahead. As the nation’s chief diplomat, she added, Pompeo will face a “steep learning curve, especially when you compare him to his counterpart in Pyongyang,” North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho, “who is a very seasoned diplomat and a US expert with years of experience.”

DiMaggio, who was deeply involved as an observer at the US talks with Iran over its nuclear program, said the lack of experience could hurt as the talks proceed. “One concern I have is if the administration would move forward with talks and handle them poorly, and then announce them as a failure. That could potentially open the way to a military action after diplomacy is deemed a failed proposition. That scenario really worries me.”

Meanwhile, convinced of North Korea’s seriousness, the Moon government is quickly setting up the foreign-policy apparatus for negotiations and organizing simultaneous talks on resolving the standoff with China, Japan, and Russia. In addition, North Korea sent Foreign Minister Ri this week to Sweden, which represents US interests in Pyongyang, and a second diplomat to Finland to meet with a group of former US and South Korean officials (Finland’s government said Wednesday the talks were “constructive.”) There was speculation that Ri’s talks in Sweden could lead to North Korea’s release of three Americans still held in prison, but by mid-week that had yet to happen.

Looking back over the past year, Pompeo's emergence as Trump's key player in North Korean affairs seems inevitable—in part because he has already been playing that role for months.

In 2017, about a week after Moon was sworn in as president, the CIA set up a Korea Mission Center that integrates officers from across the agency to “bring their expertise and creativity to bear against the North Korea target” (intelligence contractors like CACI are busy recruiting to fill the spots). Unusually for a CIA center, it has been fairly open in its work, with Pompeo and the top deputies of the center appearing as speakers at public events, including an academic conference in Washington last October. In contrast, Tillerson spoke little in public about Korea, except in brief interviews with the press.

Pompeo also “became more active in the CIA's Daily Briefs where he's personally briefing the president,” said DeTrani, the former intelligence officer. “So I think it makes eminent sense that he would be the point person on what is going on with North Korea.” Moreover, when the talks get to a stage where verification of a testing moratorium and other steps is required, US intelligence assets controlled by the CIA and the National Security Agency will be crucial, he said.

I was convinced that Pompeo was in command on January 23, when he delivered a public speech at the American Enterprise Institute and spent most of his time talking—and answering questions—about North Korea. It was one of the most detailed administration speeches yet on Korea and, to a careful listener, signaled that the Trump administration had thoroughly grasped the significance of Kim Jong-un's confirmation that he had completed development of his nuclear program and would no longer be testing.

“The logical next step [for Kim] would be to develop an arsenal of weapons” that would have “the capacity to deliver from multiple firings of these missiles simultaneously,” Pompeo said. “That's the very mission set that President Trump has directed the government to figure out a way to make sure it never occurs.” He added: “The president is intent on delivering this solution through diplomatic means. It is the focus.”

In what had to be a carefully controlled leak, last Friday the *Times* confirmed that Pompeo has been in close contact with North Korea “through a channel that runs between the C.I.A. and its North Korean counterpart, the Reconnaissance General

Bureau,” which combines the country’s formidable intelligence and special forces.

Pompeo, the *Times* said, is also working closely with Suh Hoon, the director of South Korea’s National Intelligence Service (NIS), who was in Pyongyang with Chung Eui-yong, the national security adviser. As a deputy NIS director earlier in the century, Suh lent important support to the Sunshine Policy and helped organize, with North Korean intelligence, the previous summits in 2000 and 2007 (Moon was in Pyongyang for the last one, as President Roh’s chief of staff).

Suh’s counterpart and primary host in Pyongyang was Kim Yong-chol, a vice chairman of the Central Committee of North Korea’s ruling Workers’ Party and the former head of the spy agency who now oversees Pyongyang’s relationship with South Korea. He was also Kim Jong-un’s delegate in Pyeongchang for the closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympics and, most significantly, was the official who told Moon that the North was willing to have parallel negotiations with the United States.

“He’s a [Workers’] party guy, and has done some bad things in the past,” says Sigal, referring to Kim Yong-chol. According to the South Korean government, in 2010 Kim Yong-chol masterminded the attack and sinking of a South Korean naval vessel that killed 46 sailors and brought North-South relations to an all-time low (North Korea denied involvement, and some Koreans have raised doubts about Kim Yong-chol’s involvement).

Even so, says Sigal, he is one of the best-informed North Koreans on the United States. “People don’t know he was involved with the military-to-military talks with us and the South Koreans” during the Bush administration, said Sigal. “He has a long history of knowledge about the US.”

Joel Wit, a former US negotiator on the 1994 Agreed Framework, told a Monday press briefing at the US-Korea Institute that the CIA’s channel to North Korean intelligence has existed with “ongoing contacts” since 2009, including visits to North Korea by intelligence officials in 2012 and in 2014 by James Clapper, the former Director of National Intelligence.

Kim Yong-chol “has been the main contact in this channel for much of the time,” he said. But Wit, who participates with DiMaggio in the Track II talks with North Korean diplomats, cautioned that intelligence channels are “not ideal” and have “serious drawbacks,” compared with diplomacy. “You can’t just send some

intelligence analysts off to meet with North Koreans and think that that's going to work well," he warned.

Despite the dominance of the spies, the negotiators past and present I spoke to were all optimistic that Trump could develop a framework for further negotiations, leading down the road to disarmament talks that would allow North Korea to get rid of its nuclear weapons.

And while they worried about the short time span before the summit and the lack of preparation on the US side, they said there were plenty of past US-North Korean formulations to rely on as precedents. They include declarations about denuclearization, respect for sovereignty, and economic and political normalization made jointly in 1994 and 2000, and the broader Six-Party declaration in 2005.

Most of all, they argue that Trump has a fundamental interest in testing North Korea's resolve. "To the extent the North Koreans want a fundamentally new relationship with the United States, they're prepared to do things," Sigal said. "And that's got to be tested. And the only way to test it is, you make offers at the negotiating table, see if they take them, live up to your end of the deal, and see if they live up."

"All these people who think they know what the North Koreans are going to do," he concluded with a laugh, "have no clue!"

Tim ShorrockTWITTERTim Shorrock is a Washington, DC-based journalist and the author of *Spies for Hire: The Secret World of Intelligence Outsourcing*.

Source: <https://www.thenation.com/article/south-korean-president-moons-gamble-for-peace-with-north-korea-has-paid-off/>

[Disclaimer]