

# Former South Korea special envoy: Why I'm hopeful about North Korea

By **Hong Seok-Hyun** May 7 at 4:01 PM

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SEOUL — The winds of change are sweeping Northeast Asia. The upcoming historic meeting between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump is sure to mark a turning point in the destiny of the Korean Peninsula. Although there are concerns over all the uncertainties, I harbor cautious optimism for the road ahead because I discern a sincerity in Kim. To test that sincerity, we need to give Kim the benefit of the doubt.

In the recent, historic Panmunjom summit, Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in [pledged](#) to end the war on the Korean Peninsula. Rodong Sinmun, the official newspaper of North Korea's Workers' Party, carried the full [text](#) of the Panmunjom Declaration, which clearly states North Korea is intent on "complete denuclearization."

Kim's change of heart likely resulted from his realization that as long as he holds on to nuclear weapons, economic development will be difficult. Just last month, Kim shifted policy from simultaneously pursuing nuclear weapons and economic development to focusing solely on advancing the economy. North Koreans are experimenting with the market economy: There are hundreds of informal markets known as "[jangmadang](#)," and there are [millions](#) of mobile phones in circulation. Kim may have come to the conclusion that it will not be possible to suppress the desires and grievances of his people if the current "maximum pressure" campaign against North Korea continues. Kim's aspiration for Chinese and Vietnamese-style economic growth could have been another factor.

Trump and Moon deserve the credit for bringing about Kim's change in attitude. Asserting his stance to achieve "peace through strength," Trump exerted maximum pressure on North Korea both economically and militarily. Trump's decisive move was convincing China to join tougher international economic sanctions against North Korea. Moon, for his part, brought North Korea to the dialogue table with steadfast diplomatic mediation.

Kim's shrewd judgment and boldness in finding the right time to place his bet after reading his opponent's hand is remarkable. His level of confidence and dignity also stood out. Throughout the Panmunjom summit, Kim succeeded somewhat in dispelling his image as an unstable and untrustworthy young dictator. He was polite and courteous to Moon, who is old enough to be his father. The connection forged between the two leaders will be a priceless asset in resolving future inter-Korean issues.

Trump has said he will not repeat the mistakes of previous administrations and is staunchly [demanding](#) "complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization" of North Korea. Contrary to this, Kim is likely calling for a complete, verifiable, irreversible guarantee for his regime. We need to settle the issue of denuclearization and regime guarantee once and for all by exchanging the former for the latter. We also need to set

the earliest possible deadline for denuclearization: no later than the fall of 2020, when Trump is expected to run for a second term. To do this, the South Korean and U.S. leaders need to agree on a denuclearization roadmap when they meet on May 22 ahead of the U.S.-North Korea summit.

In the Panmunjom Declaration, Moon and Kim confirmed their common goal of realizing a “nuclear-free Korean Peninsula,” but there could be a catch in that phrase. The phrase could include the withdrawal of U.S. Forces Korea and their ability to mobilize nuclear weapons here, or perhaps a ban on dispatching strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula, or the dismantlement of the nuclear umbrella for South Korea. Overall, it looks as if the key agenda of denuclearization was overshadowed by the push to promote inter-Korean relations. With the promise of the end of inter-Korean war, Kim has, in effect, neutralized the U.S. military option.

Denuclearization is an issue for the United States and North Korea to resolve, but in a bigger sense, it’s an issue between the United States and China. It would have been difficult to set a U.S.-North Korea summit had it not been for China’s cooperation. China must not feel left out in the process of establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula. If Trump assumes a strategic stance on this issue, he will consider using North Korea as a card in recalibrating U.S.-China relations.

We must also not forget Japan. Japan is an indispensable factor in incorporating North Korea into the global economy and the multilateral security order in Northeast Asia. South Korea, the United States and Japan have to play as a team in order to realize complete denuclearization and establish a lasting peace on the Korean Peninsula.

Kim must demonstrate his goodwill ahead of his meeting with Trump. It will help pave the way for successful talks if Kim returns the three American detainees held in North Korea and takes proactive measures regarding his country’s human rights violations. Trump should also prepare enticing gifts for Kim; the best gifts would be institutional measures to buttress economic development. Those initiatives could include the provision of large-scale development assistance and preferential tariff systems to follow immediately after denuclearization is achieved.

If Kim gives up his country’s nuclear program, which is specified in the constitution, it will be a challenge to deal with underlying dissatisfaction among his military brass. North Korea also has to overcome South Koreans’ sense of distrust. It’s not just anti-Communist and conservative factions — even the younger generation in South Korea harbors a cynicism and distrust of North Korea and Kim. Moon needs to embrace the naysayers in order to build national consensus. These barriers will be hard to clear if they are not supported by swift denuclearization.

As Confucius said, “Without trust, we cannot stand.” Even if there is a lack of trust now, we can solve our problems if we start by giving Kim the benefit of the doubt. This is our last chance. In the upcoming summit with Trump, Kim should show us the bold and open attitude he had at the Panmunjom summit. I hope the ripples of peace that started in Panmunjom will turn into great waves through the Trump-Kim talks to dismantle the Cold War framework on the Korean Peninsula and throughout Northeast Asia.

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