

# Former US chief spook does U-turn on denuclearization

Conventional wisdom is that North Korea will never denuclearize but with Beijing, Seoul and Washington apparently convinced, some senior experts are changing their positions. Still: The process is daunting

By [ANDREW SALMON](#) JUNE 22, 2018 7:50 PM (UTC+8)



Presidential advisor Moon Chung-in (left) and former NIC head Gregory Treverton speak at the East Asian Foundation in Seoul, Friday. Photo: Andrew Salmon/ Asia Times

While Chinese President Xi Jinping, South Korean President Moon Jae-in and US President Donald Trump seem convinced of the sincerity of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's stated intention to denuclearize, the pundits, scholars and analysts are virtually unanimous in their belief that Pyongyang will never abandon its nuclear arms programs.

However, two senior experts – one, a former head of the US National Intelligence Council, the other an architect of South Korea’s engagement policy toward North Korea and a senior advisor to the Moon administration – defied the conventional wisdom: Both opined that Kim has, indeed, made a strategic policy shift.

The two were speaking on the same day that Trump had said, in an unclear televised statement, that North Korea was already denuclearizing – a statement that no other US officials were able to back up.

Also on Friday, North and South Korea held talks on reuniting families divided since the end of the Korean War in 1953, agreeing, after day-long negotiations, to hold reunions for 100 families from each side from August 20-26. The site will be the Hyundai-built tourist resort in North Korea’s Mount Kumgang on the peninsula’s east coast, according to a message from the South Korean presidential office.

The last such reunions were held in 2015.

## **Would Kim denuclearize – and if so, why?**

Gregory Treverton, a former chair of the US National Intelligence Council under the Barack Obama administration, and a former director of the RAND Corporation’s Center for Global Risk and Security admitted that while he used to be in the former camp – i.e. a non-believer in North Korean nuclear disarmament – his views were now in flux.

“I used to say he would never give up nuclear weapons,” Treverton said in a conference hosted by the East Asian Foundation in Seoul on Friday. “I take seriously now the argument that [Kim] has completed his nuclear program, has got all the mileage he can, and wants to cash in.”

Late last year, Kim announced, following a November ballistic missile test, that his nuclear arms program was complete. (In fact, experts believe that Pyongyang has not yet mastered the technology for missile re-entry vehicle and targeting systems.)

Treverton added that he was tempted by this argument given Kim's youthfulness, and given also that, due to past experience in Switzerland, "he has seen what a normal country may look like" and may not want to be "a pariah forever."

Kim studied in Switzerland as a teen, and has created a range of infrastructure projects – water parks, ski resorts, coastal resorts – to coddle his elite. And one alleged reason why Washington favored Singapore as a summit destination was so that Kim could see for himself what a successful, prosperous Asia city looks like, close up.

Treverton's interlocutor at the East Asia Foundation conference agreed, citing Chinese moves.

"Why is Xi meeting [Kim] so frequently and giving him such great treatment?" asked Moon Chung-in. "Unless Xi had got a clear signal from Pyongyang that they will give up nuclear weapons, he would never have extended that kind of treatment."

Moon, a special advisor on unification, diplomacy and national security affairs to President Moon Jae-in, is the academic widely credited with crafting the "Sunshine Policy" of Seoul's engagement with Pyongyang under the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations.

Kim had never met Xi before this year but has so far met him three times, most recently this week. The ceremonials surrounding Kim's latest trip were almost at the level of a state visit, Moon noted.

While it has been widely reported that the meetings happened at the invitation of Xi, Moon revealed that it was, in fact, Kim who had initiated all three meetings.

He cited sources in Beijing which he did not wish to reveal for the information.

"Previously, China had asked [for a visit] but North Korea had refused," Moon said.

Moon noted that Kim has twice this year admitted that North Korea has “suffered” for its possession of nuclear arms, and that there are precedents in recent Asia history for a reformist leadership prioritizing a prosperous nation over a strong army: The Meiji Restoration in Japan; the Park Chung-hee era of fast economic growth in South Korea; and the Deng Xiaoping reformist era in China.

Still, even if Kim has made a momentous strategic U-turn, there could be internal problems in implementation.

“It seems like [Kim] has made the decision to put economics first,” said Treverton. “But he has a huge standing army to feed which has suffered budgetary cuts because of missile and nuclear programs, so there are internal constraints.”

## **Denuclearization to strain US resources, North Korean patience**

Any denuclearization process is going to be hugely difficult. Firstly, it is unprecedented, Treverton said; never before has a nation that has developed a successful nuclear arms program given it up. It is unclear if South Africa actually had a working device; the Swedish, Iranian and Libyan programs were not complete when they reached agreements to halt them; and nations like Ukraine which gave up nuclear arms had not developed them internally.

Treverton also revealed some details of the painstaking process that denuclearization entails.

Washington actually built Iranian-style centrifuges, to see how they worked, in the lead up to the Obama administration’s Iranian nuclear deal, he said. And the Iranian deal was “at the edge of US government capabilities” in terms of resources and human resources, he said. North Korea, with an actual working deterrent, would be an even “more demanding task all round,” he said.

As early steps in the trust-building process, he suggested that Kim, who has already frozen nuclear and missile tests, and destroyed parts of the underground nuclear test site at Punggye-ri, might offer a freeze on fissile material enrichment programs, or a delivery to the US of a list of all its nuclear facilities. There are believed to be over 100 scattered across North Korea, he said.

Any denuclearization process for North Korea will be highly intrusive, Treverton added. Moon suggested that the process could be inspections; verifications; a selection of facilities to be dismantled or destroyed; then further dismantlement and inspections. Basing his estimates on the South African benchmark, Moon suggested that critical components could be dismantled in around two-and-a-half years, but the complete process was likelier to take 10.

That might not fit within Trump's time window. The US president is understood to want the process effectively completed by the end of his term in early 2021.

"My main concern is how far Kim is prepared to go," Treverton said. "In terms of expectations, [the North Korean and US] timetables could be completely different. That could be a game wrecker."

And in the final analysis, "irreversible" denuclearization may be impossible. "You can't un-invent nuclear weapons," Treverton said. "Whatever happens, they will always be stone's throw from nuclear weapons."