

# Kim Jong-un Has a Dream. The U.S. Should Help Him Realize It.

By John Delury

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Sept. 21, 2018

SEOUL, South Korea — President Moon Jae-in of South Korea returned from Pyongyang this week bearing fresh messages of good will from Kim Jong-un, North Korea's leader: promises to permanently dismantle a test site and a missile-launch pad and to shutter a major nuclear facility. The pledges — “subject to final negotiations,” as President Trump artfully put it — have already been criticized as half-steps, if not traps. There still is no road map or timeline for the complete denuclearization of North Korea.

But the prevailing preoccupation with defense issues obscures a truly notable feature of Mr. Moon's visit: the group of business leaders he brought along, including from Samsung and South Korea's other major conglomerates.

The skeptics are skeptical because they tend to assume that Mr. Kim's views are in keeping with those of his grandfather Kim Il Sung, who hoped to forcibly reunify the Korean Peninsula, or his father, Kim Jong-il, who used negotiations to stall for time, desperate just to survive.

In fact, Mr. Kim's strategy and tactics belong to another archetype, one familiar here in East Asia: the strongman who sets his country on the path of economic development. Mr. Kim's ideological lineage can be traced back to Japan's postwar prime minister Yoshida Shigeru, Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, South Korea's military dictator Park Chung-hee, Taiwan's dynastic heir Chiang Ching-kuo and, above all, Deng Xiaoping in China.

Mr. Kim wants to be a great economic reformer. And the United States should help him, because that's the best way to sustain progress toward denuclearization and eventually eliminate the threat posed by North Korea.

From the moment Mr. Kim took power almost seven years ago, he signaled a shift in the regime's focus, from security to prosperity. In an early speech as leader in 2012, he promised North Koreans that they would no longer have to “tighten their belts.” He decentralized decision-making, giving farmers greater freedom to sell their crops and factory managers more control over wages and production. He lifted curbs on informal grass-roots markets and small private businesses.

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Mr. Kim announced a “new strategic line” at a high-level party meeting in March 2013, calling for “dual progress” (*byungjin*) on developing a nuclear deterrent and the civilian economy at the same time. It was a marked step away from his father’s line of “military-first politics” and its priority on defense.

*Byungjin* seemed to succeed. North Korea’s nuclear program made extraordinary progress, culminating last year in tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles, intermediate-range ballistic missiles and a thermonuclear device. Despite international sanctions, the economy achieved modest annual growth in the first years after Mr. Kim took power, peaking in 2016. There were even articles filed from “Pyonghattan” describing the North Korean capital as booming, with new high-rise apartment complexes, restaurants and stores, and traffic on the streets.

Yet Mr. Kim seemed dissatisfied with the pace of development, and in his New Year’s speech this year called for “a breakthrough” in “re-energizing” the economy. In April — just days before his first summit meeting with Mr. Moon — he declared that *byungjin* was over. In its place, he said, all efforts should go to “socialist economic construction.”

Since then, the-economy-as-priority has been regular fare in North Korea’s media and from propaganda organs. Mr. Kim spent the summer months visiting farms, factories and tourist resorts, often chastising cadres for failing to implement development projects fast enough. During recent festivities celebrating the country’s founding, the parade featured floats with economic slogans and no ICBMs. If the iconic image of Mr. Kim in 2017 shows him watching a missile test, the one for 2018 shows him inspecting a fish cannery.

But much of the international community, and Washington in particular, has been so fixated on North Korea’s nuclear capabilities that it hasn’t paid enough attention to Mr. Kim’s broader strategic intentions — or how to make progress on denuclearization by working with, rather than against, them.

Mr. Kim wants North Korea to become a normal East Asian economy, catch up with and integrate into the region, and it’s in everyone’s interest to help him do so.

For North Koreans, economic development would bring opportunities to feed their families and run businesses, trade and perhaps travel. As the economic and social chasm between North and South began to close, South Koreans could slowly envisage a time when reunification seems plausible. With the peace process on the Korean Peninsula moving forward, Americans — who already have enough to worry about — could remove the threat of a North Korean nuclear strike from their list of pressing concerns.

Mr. Moon clearly understands that Mr. Kim’s economic ambitions are the key to keeping the diplomatic process going. On his visit to Pyongyang this week, Mr. Moon brought the heads of state-backed rail and energy corporations, along with the CEOs of South Korea’s top conglomerates. No deals were struck, and the group has been mum so far about its meetings. But its presence was enough to send the message that South Korea stands ready to move forward with major economic cooperation projects with the North.

In one astonishing scene, Mr. Moon addressed a crowd of 150,000 cheering North Koreans and pledged to “hasten a future of common prosperity.” He praised Pyongyang’s “remarkable progress” and said he understood “what kind of country Chairman Kim and his compatriots in the North want to build.” In a formal agreement known as the Pyongyang Declaration, the two leaders committed to reconnect rail and road links between the two countries, reopen a frozen joint industrial zone in Kaesong and a tourist site at Mount Kumgang, and make plans for a special economic zone, of the kind Deng promoted to open up China to foreign investment in the 1980s.

Yet the opportunities for peace and denuclearization that Mr. Kim’s economic ambitions present seem largely lost on the U.S. government. Sanctions and economic pressure may have helped induce Mr. Kim to engage, but they will be an obstacle to further progress.

Ideally, American companies would play a direct role in North Korea’s development, as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo suggested earlier this year. Short of that, the United States should support the South’s efforts at economic cooperation with the North. And it shouldn’t fret so much about existing trade between North Korea and China, North Korea’s main economic partner.

Only by selectively suspending sanctions — say, carving out exceptions for joint ventures — and gradually lifting them, can the United States tap Mr. Kim’s economic ambitions to advance its own goals.

Will Mr. Kim ever give up North Korea’s nuclear weapons? There is no way to tell now, of course. But helping his project of economic development is the best chance of giving him a reason to.

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