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Kim Ready to Accept Inspection of Nuclear Plant, Adviser Says

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- South Korea presidential adviser sees Trump path to compromise
- Moon says North Korea open to verification of Yongbyon plant

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was ready to accept the dismantlement and inspection of a high-profile nuclear plant, a South Korean presidential adviser said, suggesting a possible point of compromise in upcoming talks with President Donald Trump.

Moon Chung-in, a special adviser for foreign affairs and national security, said in an interview Friday that the verified destruction of the regime's Yongbyon nuclear complex was an achievable goal during Trump's planned Feb. 27-28 summit with Kim. Moon said it was his "understanding" that South Korean President Moon Jae-in got Kim's personal assurance on that when they met in Pyongyang in September.



Moon Chung-in speaks in Seoul on Feb. 15.
Photographer: SeongJoon Cho/Bloomberg

“Kim Jong Un said ‘Yes’ and will accept verification,” Moon Chung-in told Bloomberg in Seoul on Friday. “I hope President Trump can nail it down that verification should be part of the permanent dismantling of nuclear facilities in Yongbyon.”

While Kim expressed a willingness to accept the “permanent dismantlement” of Yongbyon during the South Korean leader’s visit, his public statements stopped short of committing to “verification,” which would allow inspectors insight into his weapons capabilities. Moon Chung-in, who participated in the trip, declined to say where he got the information. He’s not related to the president.

Crown Jewel

Yongbyon used to be the crown jewel of North Korea’s nuclear arms program, with its reactor and reprocessing plant turning out enough plutonium for about one bomb a year. That role has decreased since North Korea switched to uranium enrichment for the bulk of its fissile material, carrying out the work in secret, according to anti-proliferation experts.

Talks between the U.S. and North Korea have made little visible headway since Trump and Kim signed an agreement in June to “work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” without defining the phrase or setting deadlines. North Korea argues the deal implied a step-by-step approach, with each action met by a U.S. response, while Trump administration officials assert that Kim accepted his country’s “final, fully verified denuclearization.”

Last month, U.S. nuclear envoy Stephen Biegun said that Kim had also committed to the dismantlement of enrichment facilities “beyond Yongbyon” in conversations with U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo and South Korean leaders. Still, Biegun told visiting South Korean lawmakers earlier this week that it would be hard to resolve the remaining issues between the two sides before the summit planned for Hanoi.

Moon Chung-in said the U.S. should agree to allow economic projects between the two Koreas to proceed in exchange for inspections of Yongbyon -- something the U.S. has so far been reluctant to do. Kim has railed against the international sanctions regime choking his moribund economy and called for resuming the projects, including a industrial park and a mountain resort.

“Those will be doable,” Moon Chung-in said. Such an exchange would advance talks, “without undermining the overall sanctions regime by the UN Security Council, yet

giving some kind of incentives to North Korea in a way the U.S. can come up with some sort of compromise,” he said.

Moon Chung-in, a strong advocate of South Korea rapprochement with North Korea, said the success of the Hanoi summit hinges on how North Korea proceeds with its nuclear arms program. Satellite-imagery analysis and leaked American intelligence suggest that North Korea has been churning out rockets and warheads as quickly as ever.

“If North Korea continues to produce nuclear materials even after the Hanoi summit, I would say that’s the most important indicator that the Hanoi summit failed,” Moon Chung-in said.