

Opinion **North Korea nuclear tensions**

## North Korea: US fear risks squandering the chance for peace

Scepticism of the Olympic truce is rife, but it could lead to real diplomatic progress

**JOHN DELURY**



South Korea's Moon Jae-in has proved it is possible to reason with Kim Jong Un (pictured, centre) and to lure him away from a militant path © Reuters John Delury 5 HOURS AGO

The opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics this Friday promises to be historic. Athletes from North and South Korea will march together under a blue and white flag symbolising peace and unity on the peninsula. Instead of reading about missile tests and joint US-South Korean military exercises, we will soon be watching a joint hockey team. Leader Kim Jong Un, is [sending his sister](#), a senior party official, along with North Korea's head of state and *éminence grise*, Kim Yong-nam, opening up the chance for direct talks with the inner circle in Pyongyang.

Yet, rather than making the most of this detente, our fears and fatalism towards North Korea have got the better of us. This is a rare opportunity to stimulate real diplomatic progress towards de-escalation, common security, and peace. But if we miss this window, the problem gets much harder to solve, North Korea's capabilities improve as America's threats intensify, and the geopolitical and economic risks once again [rise to an unsupportable level](#).

The range of scepticism and criticism of the Olympic truce is wide. Some observers worry that Mr Kim is trying to "drive a wedge" between Seoul and the US. Others say he is simply stalling for time before Donald Trump orders a US military strike.

Of course Mr Kim has his own motives for participating. The key point, however, is that this whole Olympic spectacle was minted in Seoul — not Pyongyang. South Korean president Moon Jae-in sent clear messages last year that he wished to use the North's participation in the games as a turning point toward dialogue, reconciliation and peace. So here we are.

Mr Moon has proved it is possible to reason with Mr Kim, and to lure him away from a militant path to explore a different avenue. The Olympic truce has lowered tensions and encouraged all parties to exercise greater self-restraint. Pyongyang has not tested a missile since the end of November, and Mr Kim announced “completion” of his strategic rocket force. The US and South Korea postponed large-scale war games.

### **Moon Jae-in sent clear messages that he wished to use the North's participation in the games as a turning point towards dialogue**

These are positive steps. Still, both sides also continue signalling mutual hostility and malign intent. Last month, the US and Canada held a summit of foreign ministers from those countries whose troops fought in the Korean war — hardly a peace overture. The US continues to flow strategic assets to the region and warn darkly that time is running out and military options are ready “if diplomacy fails”.

Pyongyang is not backing down from its nuclear deterrence posture, and Mr Kim's army is putting on a parade to remind the world that it, too, is ready to fight.

Korea's hockey players are talking, but not the world's diplomats.

The urgent question now is what can the international community do to sustain the momentum created by inter-Korean detente. For all the symbolism of the Olympic truce, there is no discussion about a realistic framework that would freeze and roll back North Korea's nuclear programme on the basis of addressing Pyongyang's legitimate security concerns.



Volunteers in Korean traditional dress greet athletes entering the Olympic Village © AP

Ideally, Washington would take the diplomatic lead, engaging Pyongyang in preliminary talks even as it rallies the world to keep up the pressure on Mr Kim. The Trump administration’s original strategy, after all, called for “maximum pressure and engagement”, and the president himself has [tweeted “talks are a good thing!”](#) But while the Trump team has done a good job on ramping up pressure, they have had a much harder time with the engagement part. As a result, they have limited understanding of Pyongyang’s will and intentions — a perilous situation.

So Washington is boxed in by its own policy of pressure and toughness. Seoul is doing its best to stabilise inter-Korean relations. But to make real progress it needs broader international support. The international community opposes North Korea’s nuclear programme, yet who looks favourably on the prospect of an American preventive war to try to eliminate it?

The critical players are the UN and Europe. Both can play the role as interested third parties able to encourage further de-escalatory steps, broker constructive dialogue, and identify steps toward common security.

António Guterres, UN secretary-general, clearly understands the need to make up for the “dialogue deficit”. He sent the top UN diplomat, Jeffrey Feltman, to Pyongyang in December on a well-timed intervention — much more along these lines will be needed in the year to come.

Seen from Europe, Korea may seem far away. But a further crisis here in one of the world’s major trading countries — located in between the second and third-largest economies — would cripple the global economy. Europe’s very distance can also be an asset, especially in the current stage when there is a pressing demand for intensified dialogue, not formal negotiations.

European actors, from the neutralists in Stockholm and Geneva to the big powers in London, Paris and Berlin, can help bridge the gap between Mr Kim’s demand for “qualitative and quantitative” progress on his nuclear deterrent and Mr Trump’s insistence on “complete, verifiable, irreversible

de-nuclearisation”. Without it, Washington and Pyongyang are likely to remain stuck in their maximalist positions.

The time has come to follow Seoul’s lead down the path of principled, constructive engagement with Pyongyang. Progress will be slow and tough. But the alternatives are unacceptable.

As we enjoy the spectacle of sport at the Pyeongchang games, diplomats around the world need to act – boldly and swiftly – to keep the window of dialogue open, and transform the Olympic truce into a lasting peace.

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