

How Corporate Media Got the Trump-Kim Summit All Wrong

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For weeks, the corporate media have been saying that the Trump-Kim summit could have only two possible results: Either Trump will walk away angrily or Kim Jong Un will trick him into a deal in which he extracts concessions from Trump but never commits to complete denuclearization.

The idea that North Korea could not possibly agree to give up its nuclear weapons or its intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) has become an article of faith among the journalists covering the issue for big media. Two themes that have appeared again and again in their coverage are that the wily North Koreans are “playing” Trump and that previous administrations had also been taken by North Korea after signing agreements in good faith.

But the media have gotten it all wrong. They have assumed that North Korea cannot live without nuclear weapons—without making any effort to understand North Korea’s strategy in regard to nuclear weapons. They have invariably quoted “experts” who haven’t followed North Korean thinking closely but who express the requisite hostility toward the summit and negotiating an agreement with the Kim regime.

One of the few Americans who can speak with authority on North Korea’s calculus regarding nuclear weapons is Joel S. Wit, who was senior adviser to the U.S. negotiator with North Korea, Ambassador Robert L. Gallucci, from 1993 to 1995, and who from 1995 to 1999 was coordinator for the 1994 “Agreed Framework” with North Korea. More importantly, Wit also participated in a series of informal meetings with North Korean officials in 2013 about North Korea’s thinking on its nuclear weapons.

At a briefing on the Trump-Kim summit last week sponsored by the website 38 North, which he started and still manages, Wit made it clear that this dismissal of North Korea’s willingness to agree to denuclearization is misguided.

“Everyone underestimates the momentum behind what North Korea is doing,” he said. “It’s not a charm offensive or a tactical trick.”

Wit [revealed](#) in an article last month that the North Koreans had informed the American participants in those 2013 meetings that Kim was already anticipating negotiations with the United States in which North Korea would agree to give up nuclear weapons in return for steps by the United States that removed its threatening posture toward North Korea. Wit said his North Korean interlocutors had pointed to a [June 2013 statement](#) by the National

Defense Commission of North Korea—the nation’s highest policymaking body—which they stated emphatically had been ordered by Kim himself to indicate a readiness to negotiate with the United States on denuclearization. The statement declared,

“The denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula is the behest of our leader” and “must be carried out . . . without fail.” And it went on to urge “high-level talks between the DPRK [North Korea] and the U.S. authorities to . . . establish peace and security in the region.”

The statement came a few months after Kim had resumed nuclear testing in an intensive effort to establish a credible nuclear deterrent. In part that was because of the young Kim’s conviction that the United States believed it could “bully” his regime in the transition after Kim father, Kim Jong Il, died in December 2011, according to Wit’s North Korean interlocutors.

But those same North Korean officials also told Wit that the new buildup would be of limited duration—only until it became possible to improve relations with the United States. That explanation suggested that Kim was pursuing a military capability primarily to serve as an incentive for Washington to come to the negotiating table and as a set of bargaining chips to obtain what it really wanted—an end to the hostile policy toward the regime by the United States.

Wit revealed that in the private meetings with Americans, North Korean officials presented a concrete plan for a three-phase agreement with the United States on denuclearization in which each side would undertake a set of related steps simultaneously. The American participants were told that the first stage of North Korea’s implementation would be a freeze on its nuclear weapons development, followed by disabling key facilities and finally dismantling the facilities as well the nuclear weapons. The U.S. steps would include diplomatic recognition, ending economic sanctions and removing the U.S. military threat to North Korea, in part by finally bringing the Korean War to a formal conclusion.

It was the same approach to a denuclearization agreement to which North Korea had agreed in 1994 and again in 2005 and 2007, but which had failed primarily because of the reluctance of the Clinton and Bush administrations to commit to entering into a normal political and economic relationship with North Korea.

The political context for U.S.-North Korean negotiations has changed dramatically since 2013. The most obvious change is that North Korea has an ICBM capable of reaching the United States for the first time. Although it provoked threats by the Trump administration in 2017 to attack North Korea if it completed work on the ICBM, it also has prompted the White House to consider going further than previous administrations in meeting North Korean diplomatic demands.

Furthermore, in 2013, the South Korean government was hostile to diplomacy with the North, and the Obama administration was [unwilling to consider](#) any major political or security concessions to North Korea until after it had given up its nuclear weapons. Now South Korean President Moon Jae-in has gone further than any previous government in pushing to end the 70-year military tension and formal state of war between North and South. Moon’s commitment to a Korean peace agreement appears to be the single biggest reason that Kim switched gears so dramatically in a New Year’s Day speech that presaged

dramatic diplomatic moves in 2018.

Reflecting the new political-diplomatic situation, in April Kim put forward [a new strategic line](#) calling for the bulk of the state's resources to go to economic development. That replaced the [bjungjin line](#) that Kim had introduced in March 2013 putting economic rebuilding and military needs on an equal footing.

Kim has made major adjustments in the North Korean negotiating posture that prevailed when the 2013 meetings were held with nonofficial Americans. The North Koreans had insisted then that the United States would have to remove their troops from South Korea as part of any agreement, according to Wit. But that demand has now been dropped, as Moon [told](#) Trump in mid-April.

Kim also has frozen his entire nuclear weapons and ICBM programs by suspending testing and [blowing up facilities and tunnels](#) at its nuclear test facility in front of foreign journalists in advance of negotiations with the United States. What gives the freeze far-reaching significance is the fact that North Korea still has not shown that it has mastered the reentry technology or the guidance system necessary to have a convincing deterrent capability, as Defense Secretary James Mattis [observed](#) last December. And then CIA Director Mike Pompeo agreed in January that it would take a [“handful of months”](#) for North Korea to be able to master the remaining technological challenges—but that would require additional testing. The willingness to freeze the program before it had reached its goal indicates the predominance of Kim's diplomatic aim over North Korea's military ambitions.

Contrary to the idea relentlessly repeated in media coverage that there is no objective basis for a denuclearization agreement, it has become clear to Pompeo that Kim is serious about reaching such an agreement. Pompeo [noted in his press conference](#) that he had spent “a great deal of time” discussing the prospective deal in two meetings with Kim himself and three meetings with Kim's special envoy, Kim Yong-chol. And based on the many hours of discussion with them, Pompeo said he believes

“they are contemplating a path forward where they can make a strategic shift, one that their country has not been prepared to make before.”

Trump and Kim will be able to agree only on a broad statement of principles that reflect Pompeo's meetings with the North Koreans, leaving significant differences remaining to be resolved in negotiations over the coming weeks. But this summit between what is surely the oddest couple in modern diplomatic history may well launch the most serious effort yet to end the U.S.-North Korean conflict.

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