

Editor's Summary: North Korea: Peace? Nuclear War?

A forthcoming book, **North Korea: Peace? Nuclear War?**, provides fresh views by the world's leading experts of the Korean nuclear crisis, how it might be solved, and the exceptional difficulties of any solution. The experts, representing all viewpoints, parties, and countries involved (except North Korea itself) have conflicting viewpoints on many issues. They agree that instant denuclearization of North Korea is impossible. The book does, however, show that there is a path to peace.

The book is endorsed by leading national security experts, including William Perry, former U.S. Secretary of Defense, and Gregory Treverton, former Chairman of the U.S. National Intelligence Council. A pre-publication text of the book is temporarily available on the Harvard Kennedy School website and on the Editor's personal website:

<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/mrcbg/publications/books>

<http://www.theoverholtgroup.com/media/Articles-Korea/Korea-Peace-or-Nuclear-War.pdf>

Most commentary on the summit negotiations assumes that past erratic North Korean behavior prefigures Kim Jong Un's future behavior. This creates misleading conclusions. Kim Jong Un has a different education, a different life horizon, a different economic situation, a different social environment and a different international context. He has a Swiss education and therefore an awareness of how other economies work whereas his father and grandfather understood only the Soviet model. He is very conscious that the Asian economies that have emphasized economic growth have pulled far ahead of those, like North Korea, that have given exclusive priority to the military. Whereas his father was able to live out his lifespan, despite having devastated the economy because he was already old and sick when he caused a catastrophic famine, Kim Jong Un has no chance of surviving politically, and perhaps physically, if he does not fix the economy.

Unlike his father, Kim Jong Un has achieved initial economic reform success. Although his reforms still mainly comprise allowing markets to function despite being technically illegal, all aspects of the economy show visible improvement. Experience elsewhere in Asia shows that economic success is addictive. It improves political support, provides resources for internal and external security, and becomes universally expected.

North Korea's social situation is changing decisively. In the past it could keep its people isolated from knowledge of how much better life is in neighboring countries. For a long time it even maintained the absurd fiction that North Koreans were more prosperous than South Koreans. Now the bubble has burst. North Koreans are very conscious of how much better life is in South Korea and China. Given this reality and the necessity of developing the economy, Kim Jong Un has decided to run the risk of a limited opening. North Korea remains more repressed than China, but for instance its scholars now openly and eagerly seek American books and its people no longer fear contact with foreigners. Kim Jong Un's public apology in his 2018 New Year speech for not having fulfilled economic goals typifies both the new economic priorities and the new (relative) public openness.

Kim Jong Un's international environment has also become more demanding. His nuclear success has brought tighter international sanctions and a much more active, determined Chinese role. Western commentators often underestimate the intensity of Chinese determination. In addition to providing dramatic examples of the intensity of Chinese concern, the book provides a comprehensive and

authoritative enunciation of China's Korea policy by a professor who spent two decades as the Chinese Army General Staff's top intelligence agent on North Korea.

Nuclear weapons serve multiple purposes for North Korea. The successful program has been crucial in Kim Jong Un's consolidation of power and his ability to control conservatives hostile to his economic priorities and social opening. Likewise it has been decisive in getting North Korea treated as a power whose views must be parsed seriously. Crucially, they have given him a decisive argument toward his own military, who are accustomed to a near-monopoly of national resources. Like Eisenhower, who argued that nuclear weapons provided "More bang for a buck" and therefore freed resources for the national highway system, Kim can use nuclear weapons as an argument for shifting some resources to the economy. Those purposes have been accomplished and therefore no longer drive the nuclear program.

While nuclear weapons remain North Korea's only effective defense against larger neighbors and the U.S., given sanctions they are now the principal impediment to Kim's core goal of rapid economic growth. Analysts from diverging viewpoints agree that as long as nuclear weapons are the only defense against hostile giants, Pyongyang will not give them up. Hopes for denuclearization therefore depend on whether a credible agreement on peace, economic opening and security guarantees can be substituted for the nuclear weapons. If it can, Kim Jong Un's chances of surviving the next 40 years of his expected career would be greatly enhanced. That is why he is willing to commit, conditionally, to eventually abandoning nuclear weapons.

A deal for a nuclear weapons program to be traded away by a small, economically and militarily inferior country in favor of strong security guarantees and economic support is the deal South Korea reluctantly made in the early 1970s when it was overshadowed by a then-much stronger North Korea. Kim Jong Un now wants the same deal.

That leads to the great chicken and egg problem of our time. North Korea says it will give up its nuclear weapons and open itself to thorough verification when it has assurances of national security and economic support. The U.S. says it will agree to peace and economic opening only after North Korea has given up its nuclear weapons.

The chicken and egg problem can be solved and such a solution may be the only way to defuse the world's greatest current danger of nuclear war. But that path is technically difficult and requires overcoming extreme mutual mistrust. Kim Jong Un does seem to be set on a new path, but his father and grandfather have created perhaps the world's worst record of vicious unreliability. The U.S. thinks of itself as virtuous but, as the book documents, has been quite unreliable itself. Both sides have powerful reasons for distrust.

The fragility of each party to the discussion adds to the risk. South Korean President Moon's peace policy is popular but economic weakness could lead to his replacement by a conservative government hostile to the negotiations. Kim Jong Un has taken extreme personal risks in shifting to economic priorities and to (even limited) social opening and could be overthrown by conservative factions. The U.S. record is that each new administration walks away from its predecessor's understandings and agreements with North Korea, and that seems an even greater risk to any agreement reached by President Trump, whether his successor is Republican or Democrat.

The thin hope that these risks can be overcome arises from the new developments. Kim Jong Un is serious about altering his country's path. The two Koreas have seized the initiative and their search for peace has support from perhaps the world's most nationalistic people. China is fully engaged and determined both to make an agreement happen and to enforce the reduction and elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons. Perhaps most important, key leaders are motivated by consciousness that we now face highest risk ever of nuclear confrontation and probably the last chance at nuclear arms control.

Ambassador Kathleen Stephens, arguably America's longest-serving Korea expert and the only Korean-speaking ambassador the U.S. has ever appointed, draws on her experience in facilitating the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland to argue that, even when there are decades of violence and hatred and mistrust, steady efforts at trust-building and agreement-crafting can succeed. Whether U.S. foreign policy is capable of such steady efforts will now be tested.

North Korea: Peace? Nuclear War? is a collaboration of three research centers at Harvard University: the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government, the Ash Center and the Korea Institute. The editor, William H. Overholt was involved in the earliest non-proliferation efforts in Asia, including curtailing the South Korea nuclear program. He published the first book on nuclear proliferation and nuclear strategy in Asia: **Asia's Nuclear Future** (1976). The book's sponsorship does not imply endorsement of any opinions. The co-authors' views are diverse and some contradict aspects of the Editor's overview. Hard copies of the book will become available in April.