

# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

May/ June 2020  
Volume 99 • Number 3

## What Kim Wants

### The Hopes and Fears of North Korea's Dictator

*Jung H. Pak*

The contents of *Foreign Affairs* are copyrighted ©2019 Council on Foreign Relations, Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduction and distribution of this material is permitted only with the express written consent of *Foreign Affairs*. Visit [www.foreignaffairs.com/permissions](http://www.foreignaffairs.com/permissions) for more information.

---

# What Kim Wants

---

## The Hopes and Fears of North Korea's Dictator

---

*Jung H. Pak*

Between 2017 and 2019, relations between the United States and North Korea made for great television. Perhaps this was by design: U.S. President Donald Trump seemed to believe that any interactions between the two adversaries would be more successful—or at least play more to his strengths—the more they resembled an entertaining spectacle in which he took center stage. For his part, the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un took advantage of Trump's apparent desire for drama, which put Kim and his country at the center of world events. But a spectacle might have been inevitable, given the two leaders' shared penchant for aggressiveness and unpredictability.

The first season of the resulting show was marked by confrontation: Kim's belligerent rhetoric and nuclear and missile tests in 2017, Trump's threats ("fire and fury"), and insults the two men hurled at each other (Trump dubbed Kim "Little Rocket Man," and Kim dismissed Trump as a "mentally deranged U.S. dotard"). In the second season, the plot took a twist, as the main characters stepped back from the brink and held two carefully choreographed summits. After the first meeting, held in Singapore in June 2018, Trump was effusive. "Everybody can now feel much safer than the day I took office," he declared on Twitter. "There is no longer a Nuclear Threat from North Korea."

In fact, the summit had achieved little, and in the months that followed, negotiations remained deadlocked. The lack of progress became clear to all at a second summit, held in Hanoi in February 2019. The meeting ended abruptly, without the parties issuing a joint statement. A few months later, the two leaders appeared together once

---

**JUNG H. PAK** is SK-Korea Foundation Chair in Korea Studies at the Brookings Institution. She is the author of *Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer's Insights Into North Korea's Enigmatic Young Dictator* (Ballantine Books, 2020), from which this essay is adapted.

more, this time in the demilitarized zone that separates North Korea and South Korea. But it was little more than a photo op, aimed at keeping up the appearance of progress.

The show now seems to have gone on an extended hiatus, and it's not clear whether there will ever be a third season or if it has already reached an unsatisfying end. The Trump administration continues to insist on a narrative of progress, which the White House narrowly defines as the absence of nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile testing on Kim's part. But in the meantime, the Kim regime has been enriching uranium, expanding its long-range missile bases, developing new ballistic missiles, and upgrading its nuclear-weapons-related facilities. The White House credits its strategy of "maximum pressure"—the use of diplomatic, economic, and military means to constrain North Korea's ability to generate funds for its nuclear weapons program—with bringing Kim to the negotiating table. But the sanctions infrastructure has eroded. North Korea has adapted evasion techniques. Its top trading partner, China, has loosened its enforcement of sanctions, seeking regional stability over denuclearization. And the Trump administration itself relaxed elements of its policy in order to maintain Kim's interest in diplomacy. As maximum pressure has morphed into maximum flexibility, Kim seems to have concluded that provocation and passive-aggressive intransigence are enough to secure his country's relevance and independence and his own survival.

In short, the North Korean threat still very much exists, and the Kim regime is determined to stay capable of putting the United States and its allies at risk. If Trump's gambit achieved anything, it was to clarify that Washington and its allies should not seek to make Kim feel more secure and emboldened by making concessions. Rather, they should focus on altering Kim's calculations in such a way that he comes to see having nuclear weapons not as an indispensable asset but as an unacceptable risk to his survival. Doing so requires understanding what makes Kim tick and, perhaps more important, the incentives that structure his decision-making. It also requires the United States and its partners to remain clear about their chief objective: the complete dismantling of North Korea's nuclear weapons arsenal.

## **UNDERSTANDING KIM**

Since inheriting his leadership role from his father, Kim Jong Il, in 2011, Kim Jong Un has taken ownership of the country's nuclear program. He sees his country's military programs as symbols of prestige

and progress and has pegged to them his personal legacy and that of the Kim family dynasty. Moreover, he has elevated and embedded nuclear weapons in both the popular consciousness and the ideological, physical, and cultural landscape, enshrining them in North Korea's constitution and linking them to the country's prosperity.

Pyongyang wields its nuclear weapons to deter a U.S. attack and to conduct coercive diplomacy—including the use of limited violence—to weaken Washington's alliances with Tokyo and Seoul, retain independence of action from Beijing, and maintain North Korea's leverage and strategic relevance amid wealthier and more powerful neighbors. Kim has manufactured and exploited crises by taking provocative steps, such as threatening to test a hydrogen bomb over the Pacific Ocean, and he has cleverly used the perception of the regime's unpredictability and volatility to extract economic and political concessions.

U.S. officials sometimes speak of Kim as if he were an irrational hothead determined to start a war with the United States. After Kim tested a hydrogen bomb in September 2017, Nikki Haley, then the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, warned that the North Korean leader was “begging for war,” and James Mattis, then the U.S. defense secretary, pledged “a massive military response” to any further threats. Two months later, after Kim tested an intercontinental ballistic missile, U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, Republican of South Carolina, fumed that Washington would not “let this crazy man in North Korea have the capability to hit the homeland.” Such language was probably an effort to warn Pyongyang about the consequences of its actions, to press Beijing to use its clout to rein in Kim, and to assure allies. But it also revealed a belief that Kim is irrational and reckless, a notion that has stubbornly clung to discussions about him since he took the reins in 2011. That belief conflates capabilities with intentions and assumes a strategic intent—that Kim seeks a nuclear war with the United States—that almost certainly does not exist.

Over the years, the U.S. intelligence community has firmly concluded that Kim is rational and that his primary purposes for having nuclear weapons are deterring rivals, maintaining his country's international status, and securing his regime's survival. Kim is most likely to use his nuclear weapons against the United States or a U.S. ally only if he assesses that an attack on his country is imminent. Kim's personal stamp on the program, the regime's public celebration of its various technical milestones, and the promotion of scientists and



*Desk job: Kim watching a missile launch in Pyongyang, September 2017*

technicians involved in it all suggest that nuclear weapons are a source of great domestic pride and a vital part of Kim's image as a responsible head of state, which in recent years he has worked to burnish.

In his 2019 New Year's address, Kim wore a suit and tie, as he has since 2017, in place of the dark Mao-style jacket he opted for in earlier years. For the first time, he delivered the address while seated comfortably in an overstuffed leather chair as opposed to standing stiffly at a massive lectern. His appearance reinforced the speech's tone and message: Kim is a modern leader—calm, relatable, professional. Postings on official social media accounts regularly show him smiling alongside his stylish wife and attending summits with other global leaders. The message is clear: Kim is not an immature oddball but rather an old hand at negotiations, respected by his peers abroad.

Nevertheless, although Kim is just as rational as other leaders and shares their desire to be seen as a player on the world stage, his incentive structure and threat perceptions do not necessarily resemble theirs. In the minds of well-meaning peace activists and academics encouraged by Kim's turn to diplomacy, North Korea has always wanted a security guarantee from the United States, and its development of nuclear weapons is a reaction to the perceived threat that

Washington poses to Pyongyang. Some scholars also insist that Kim wants to be a great economic reformer; according to the historian John Delury, Kim wants “North Korea to become a normal East Asian economy” and seeks to “catch up with and integrate into the region.”

---

*Kim does not want a “normal” security environment; he wants to preserve his garrison state.*

---

In this view, what North Korea really wants is peace and prosperity. In reality, the regime requires a hostile outside world to justify its diversion of scarce resources into military programs, to be able to cast blame on others for the problems in the country’s economy, and to maintain the founda-

tional myth that the Kim family is the sole protector of North Korea’s existence. The historian Sheila Miyoshi Jager has argued that since 1950, when North Korea invaded South Korea, the regime’s main strategic goal has been not peace but “the disruption of peace.” The goal of its propaganda and massive indoctrination efforts is to continually stoke fear of the United States.

Kim does not want a “normal” security environment; he wants to preserve his garrison state. He trusts only himself to safeguard North Korea’s security and his own survival: after all, even allies such as China and Russia chose to normalize relations with South Korea and have signed on to UN sanctions against North Korea. He puts little faith in the democratic governments of his rivals. The United States holds presidential elections every four years, and South Korea elects a president who is limited to a single five-year term: Who knows whether either government would stick to any deal it offered? Trump’s 2018 withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal provided yet another piece of evidence for Kim that Washington is a fickle and unreliable partner.

Kim doesn’t trust his own people, either, and fears the influx of information from outside his propaganda machine that would accompany regional economic integration. That is why he has tightened borders and instituted draconian punishments for those who attempt to defect, engage in unsanctioned market activities, or dare to consume South Korean soap operas, films, books, or music. In addition to these defensive measures, Kim has created a closed-off intranet that substitutes for the global Internet and has encouraged the development of a consumer culture around domestically produced luxury goods and services. For example, in recent years, the regime



has introduced online shopping portals for smartphone users, offering high-end clothing, women's accessories, cosmetics, and specialty food items. And since he came to power, Kim has ramped up a massive building boom, constructing ski resorts, amusement parks, a new airport, a dolphinarium, restaurants, and high-rise luxury apartment buildings to showcase North Korea's modernity.

### **TOUGH GUY**

Despite having many reasons to feel insecure, Kim has grown more confident since he took power. His faith in his ability to provoke attention and then de-escalate and avoid punishment has been reinforced by his success in securing summits with Trump without giving an inch on his nuclear weapons program. His reading of the events of recent years is that in a crisis, his arsenal would deter Washington from taking military action, Beijing and Moscow would not abandon him, and the United States and China would rein in any aggressive impulses on the part of Japan or South Korea and restrain those two countries from developing their own nuclear weapons.

Armed with these assumptions, Kim will probably continue to carry out limited acts of aggression, using cyberweapons and other coercive tools to keep North Korea's rivals off balance. Since the failed Hanoi summit, Kim's Plan B has taken shape: cast North Korea as the aggrieved party and put pressure on Washington to budge. In an April 2019 speech to his country's Supreme People's Assembly, Kim touted his strong personal relationship with Trump and the importance of dialogue and negotiations but also declared that "the United States will not be able to move us one iota nor get what it wants at all, even if it sits with us a hundred times, a thousand times." He warned of a "bleak and very dangerous" situation if the United States does not change its "hostile" policies toward North Korea.

He soon took steps to back up his tough talk. In July 2019, North Korea's state media reported that Kim had inspected a newly built submarine that might be intended for launching ballistic missiles and had instructed his officials to "steadily and reliably increase the national defense." Three months later, he presided over a series of missile tests, including one involving a ballistic missile launched from a sea-based platform. A couple of months later, in December, Kim defiantly declared that "the world will witness a new strategic weapon" and hinted at a return to nuclear tests. Kim's efforts to diversify



his military's arsenal, develop a second-strike nuclear capability, upgrade his military's conventional armaments and training, and improve surveillance and reconnaissance suggest that he wants more than the mere ability to deter rivals. They indicate that Kim may have adopted a more expansive vision of how to use his nuclear and missile programs: to advance offensive objectives, such as fostering conditions conducive to the reunification of the Korean Peninsula on terms favorable to his regime.

Still, Kim remains vulnerable. "North Korea's fundamental liabilities are systemic and enduring," the North Korea expert Jonathan Pollack has argued, and "the vision of a self-reliant country bears little relation to North Korea's actual needs." The consequences of the regime's actions and the country's isolation are taking a toll. Thanks to sanctions, its pool of trading partners has shrunk to essentially one: China, which accounts for more than 90 percent of North Korea's trade. In 2017, North Korea's number two trading partner, India, accounted for only slightly more than \$7 million worth of imports and exports, a decrease of ten percent from the prior year. Russia was in a distant third place, with around \$2 million worth, a 70 percent decrease from a year earlier. Also in 2017, trade between the two Koreas plummeted to about \$1 million, down from \$333 million in 2016. North Korea's economy shrank by about five percent in 2018, reducing it to a level comparable to that of 1997, when the country was in the midst of a devastating famine. And reports that trickled out of the country in early 2019 suggested that the regime was ceasing or suspending activity and production at government-backed factories and mines amid restrictions on flows of oil into the country. Meanwhile, Kim is trying to squeeze more money out of the North Korean laborers the regime sends to work overseas.

Kim needs to stimulate North Korea's economic development, since he is probably planning to be in power for the next few decades and wants to pass down a stable, thriving, nuclear-armed North Korea to one of his children. But amid rising expectations (especially among young people, who are more individualistic and market-oriented than their elders), the crippling effects of sanctions and isolation will make it hard for Kim to deliver on his promises and rhetoric. Moreover, the regime's closing of North Korea's borders to tourism and trade to stop the spread of COVID-19 has dramatically reduced the country's revenue streams, just when it can least afford it.

## **EYES ON THE PRIZE**

To ramp up the pressure, sharpen the choices that Kim has to make, and alter his risk calculus, the United States and its regional allies must undertake coordinated and consistent actions to convince him that nuclear weapons make his survival less, rather than more, secure. To do so, Washington and its allies—especially Tokyo and Seoul—need to stay on the same page. Any real or perceived fissures or doubts about U.S. credibility and commitments will play to Kim's advantage, allowing him to disrupt regional stability and pull off attacks that would fall just below the threshold for retaliation.

First and foremost, the allies must reaffirm that a durable peace in Northeast Asia requires a nuclear-free North Korea. In pursuit of that objective, the United States, Japan, and South Korea should develop a menu of options that they are prepared to jointly execute to minimize the North Korean threat, giving Beijing the choice of either cooperating or getting out of the way. The list could include covert actions against North Korea and also overt steps, such as enhancing joint military drills to prepare for a range of potential North Korean provocations. Meanwhile, Japan and South Korea could strengthen their own security by reaffirming and implementing their 2016 agreement on military intelligence sharing, which in the past year has been threatened by a trade dispute between the two countries.

The United States and its partners also need to tighten the sanctions regime, which has eroded in the aftermath of the failed Trump-Kim summits. The UN Panel of Experts, the group in charge of monitoring the implementation of the sanctions, has been documenting serious violations and the clever tactics that North Korea uses to evade the sanctions. According to the panel's March 2019 report, Singaporean companies have knowingly shipped banned luxury items to North Korea, and a Chinese businessman helped transfer a number of Mercedes-Benz vehicles—possibly including the Mercedes-Maybach S-class limousine that Kim flaunted at the Hanoi summit. The panel has also reported that North Korea has violated sanctions by conducting unauthorized ship-to-ship transfers of petroleum; in August 2019, the United States blacklisted a number of Chinese entities for facilitating such illegal transfers. Meanwhile, representatives of the Kim regime's financial institutions continue to travel freely and do business in a number of countries, including China, Russia, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. The panel's August 2019 report detailed how

the regime has become more sophisticated in its manipulation of cyberspace, generating as much as \$2 billion in ill-gotten gains by launching attacks on foreign financial institutions and cryptocurrency exchanges. The regime has also made money through email phishing scams and ransomware, with which attackers hold hostage the data of individuals or organizations until the targets pay up. Such violations have helped keep the Kim regime stay afloat and fund its nuclear weapons program.

Washington should also augment its diplomacy by starting a round of five-party talks with China, Japan, Rus-

sia, and South Korea. Such a group would signal a unity of purpose, and it could agree on a list of benefits that Pyongyang should receive if it decides to abandon its nuclear weapons program. The existence of such a group would also help assuage Pyongyang's concerns about whether any deal it made would survive political changes in the democratic countries involved.

Another pressure point that needs attention is the Kim regime's domestic repression. Washington should restore the position of special envoy for human rights in North Korea, which the Trump administration eliminated in 2017. The envoy should engage with North Korean officials, defectors, and nongovernmental human rights organizations to craft strategies for improving the lives of the North Korean people and supporting the development of their political freedoms and civil rights. Such steps are necessary for any potential deal, since in order to verify that the regime was taking promised steps toward denuclearization, scientists, technicians, and military officials would have to feel free to provide accurate data without fear of reprisal from the regime.

Meanwhile, the United States should invest in programs that allow outside information to penetrate North Korea, a process that helps loosen the regime's grip on its people and creates pressure from the inside. As the scholar Jieun Baek wrote in these pages in 2017, "Pyongyang considers foreign information of any kind a threat and expends great effort keeping it out. The regime's primary fear is that exposure to words, images, and sounds from the outside world could make North Koreans disillusioned with the state of affairs in their own

---

*Washington should restore the position of special envoy for human rights in North Korea, which the Trump administration eliminated.*

---

country, which could lead them to desire—or even demand—change.” Washington should feed North Korean citizens’ hunger for news, soap operas, documentaries, and radio programs. Working with South Korea, the United States should help North Korean defectors develop programming and partner with technology companies to pursue new ways to produce and distribute such content.

There are no silver bullets, and these policies would have to be sustained over time before they showed any demonstrable effect. They would require disciplined U.S. leadership and a strong international coalition; they would not be dramatic or made for television. Although the United States should keep the door open for dialogue with North Korea, there shouldn’t be any more glitzy spectacles that reduce the pressure on Kim without requiring any real concessions on his part. Until it is clear that Kim is willing to consider serious negotiations over his nuclear weapons program and meaningful engagement with the United States and his neighbors—and not just hollow summitry—Washington should hold off on any grand gestures. 🌐