

# In Focus

## The Quest for a Denuclearized North Korea

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# Predicting Chaos: The Debate on Denuclearization Isn't Over

## By John Nilsson-Wright

In Focus: Wright

In November, around 30 senior historians, government officials and analysts from Europe, South Korea and the United States gathered for a two-day track 1.5 meeting convened by the UK's Royal Institute of International Affairs with the support of South Korea's Institute for National Security Strategy and the Asia Research Fund, a Seoul-based foundation. The focus was the situation on the Korean Peninsula.

John Nilsson-Wright provides an account of the meeting, and puts it in the context of the surprise announcement that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump plan to meet in May.

MORE THAN 20 years ago, in the tranquil and hallowed surroundings of the Hugh Trevor-Roper seminar room in Oxford, the Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis posed a challenging question to a small group of academics and graduate students: how well equipped are historians and international relations specialists to predict, or at least anticipate, the future? His question provoked a lively and at times fractious debate between the IR specialists, defending the predictive and policy-relevant nature of their discipline, and the historians, for the most part resisting the notion that history could provide general insights that could be used to discern the future.

Notwithstanding these stark, contrasting positions, Gaddis's stimulating question laid the basis for an exciting methodological insight (as well as a seminal article in *International Security*)<sup>1</sup> — namely, that the challenge of prediction in the realm of international politics can be enhanced by borrowing from the semi-hard sciences of geology, evolutionary biology, and the chaos-theory-dependent work of practitioners either in the life-sciences more broadly or fields such as meteorology. Underpinning these different disciplines is a recognition of the interaction of both linear and cyclical patterns of change, as well as the critical role of contingency or chance in influencing particular historical and future outcomes.

The importance of contingency in disrupting our most fixed and seemingly solid predictions seems especially relevant in the aftermath of US President Donald Trump's dramatic and surprise March 8 announcement that he would accept an offer from his North Korean counterpart, Kim

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<sup>1</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, "International Relations Theory and the End of the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 3, Winter 1992/93.

Jong Un, to meet for talks in May this year. Kim's surprise gambit, and Trump's equally surprising positive response, has, like the familiar "apple of discord" in Greek mythology, thrown the strategic, political and diplomatic situation on the Korean Peninsula and inter-alliance relations into turmoil, undercutting the apparent clear-cut certainties of specialists seeking to understand how to resolve the North Korean crisis.

This becomes clear if one reflects on recent policy deliberations on Korea. In late November 2017, the UK's Royal Institute of International Affairs — otherwise known as Chatham House — with the support of South Korea's Institute for National Security Strategy (INSS) and the Asia Research Fund, a Seoul-based foundation, convened a closed-door track 1.5 meeting involving 30 European, South Korean, and US think tank analysts, academics (both historians and international relations specialists) and government officials to consider likely developments on the Korean Peninsula and options for resolving the current crisis.

The two days of deliberations were structured around four sets of issues: the nature of North-South Korean relations; US policy towards North Korea under the Trump administration; the role of Europe in helping to alleviate the Korean crisis; and a final discussion looking ahead to the next five years to anticipate how the crisis over North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities might end. Strikingly, in each of these sessions, the discussion either overlooked or under-emphasized recent developments and the potential evolution of the Korean situation in early 2018. This should not necessarily be seen as a failure or an analytical shortcoming. The thinking of the majority of the participants was one of cautious pessimism and a prominent view was that the probability of military conflict in the near future was particularly high — in one case, perhaps as high as 25 percent.

Such predictive caution is perhaps the natural

default position of policy specialists, particularly when engaging on issues that are likely to have profound life-or-death consequences. It demonstrates, however, the difficulty of modelling and anticipating the behavior of individual leaders — especially ones with maverick temperaments and a propensity for risky decision-making such as Trump and Kim. Moreover, we are not out of the woods yet. Skeptics rightly point to the lack of formal bureaucratic preparation for the May talks and suggest that without any immediate and obvious new concessions from North Korea, beyond its existing agreement to freeze its missile and nuclear tests, the bilateral summit between the US and North Korea may never materialize. Moreover, even if the talks take place, there is a high risk of failure that may in turn amplify rather than lower the risk of war, should a disgruntled and angry Trump choose to support military action in the face of an obdurate Kim intent on keeping his nuclear weapons.

## PREDICTIVE CHALLENGES

Whatever the outcome of the talks, the latest developments are a cautionary reminder of how quickly and unexpectedly a critical strategic situation can change, even if the underlying factors, whether cyclical or linear phenomena, remain constant. In the case of the Korean crisis, the ingrained history of distrust and enmity between the US and North Korea, the potentially pivotal role of South Korea in sometimes effecting dramatic breakthroughs — such as the 2000 and 2007 North-South Korean summits — and the marginal role for extra-regional actors, such as Europe, are familiar features of past crises. Moreover, these constants exist in a context where Pyongyang has been steadily enhancing the capabilities of its weapons of mass destruction and against a backdrop of declining relative US power, accelerated by Trump's shift toward

“America First” unilateralism but which arguably began under the George W. Bush and Barack Obama presidencies, if not before. Such long-term linear trends co-exist with regular, cyclical patterns of inter-state behavior to help us understand the dynamics of the North Korean problem.

The predictive challenges remain considerable. Strikingly, the November Chatham House discussions were very pessimistic. While past South Korean administrations, as far back as the early 1970s, have actively explored options for normalization of ties with Pyongyang, the prevailing view of the participants was that the likelihood of a breakthrough was very low. Seoul, some observers argued, would be held back by a skeptical Washington and there would be little chance for the administration of President Moon Jae-in to make any credible overtures to Pyongyang. Moreover, the absence of a strong and durable network of personal ties between South Korean and North Korean officials — the product, in part, of Kim’s purges of officials close to his father’s regime, most notably his late uncle Jang Song-thaek — would complicate any effort to start talks between the two Koreas. Equally important was the constraining influence of public opinion in South Korea. While President Moon’s progressive background, the pro-engagement legacy of his political mentors, former Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun, and his personal commitment to improved North-South ties — Moon’s family has its origins in North Korea — are important, the South Korean public has been generally unenthusiastic about rapprochement with North Korea. Its past belligerency, the preoccupation of many South Koreans (especially young voters) with domestic economic issues, and skepticism surrounding past overtures (the 2000 and 2007 summits, for example, were criticized for having been secured through large and covert financial



inducements from Seoul) were all seen as a powerful brake on any new talks.

Clearly, then, the PyeongChang “peace” Olympics and the sending of a North Korean delegation and athletes to the games was a surprise development, a breakthrough possibly effected by private, diplomatic overtures by the Moon administration to Pyongyang as early as last December. The South Korean administration has been, it seems, more creative and diplomatically proactive than the earlier picture of a politically cautious, dependent and semi-constrained US ally might have suggested.

#### ‘DEATH SPIRAL’ DERAILED?

When it came to analyzing the US and its policy priorities towards North Korea, the expectations of some of the Chatham House roundtable participants make a striking contrast to actual recent

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developments. For the academics and policy specialists, the assumptions were almost uniformly negative. It was felt that the mood in Washington was becoming increasingly hawkish and receptive to the use of military force, whether surgical strikes or a full-blown assault on North Korea. In the words of one participant, an especially pessimistic (and perhaps intentionally provocative) one, North Korea and the US were locked in a “death spiral.” In this analysis, only a calculation by Pyongyang that it had secured its military modernization objectives (through its sixth nuclear test and its November launch of its long-range Hwasong 15 missile), and a desire by Kim Jong Un to focus on his second primary goal of economic revitalization, would be sufficient to persuade it to compromise and consider entering into talks with the US. And this was assumed to be at best a slim possibility. Overall, the pre-

vailing view in the discussion was negative, with most assuming that Kim would double down on his position and some suggesting that if backed into a corner by the US or if the survival of his regime were threatened, he would be willing to risk a self-destructive and ultimately suicidal conflict with the country’s adversaries.

The new and unexpected appetite for US-North Korea dialogue (it is surely premature to hail this as “detente”) has taken many observers by surprise. This has been true as much for Europeans as Americans. In our discussions on the role of Europe in facilitating an end to the deadlock, the Chatham House participants included a number of Europeans with regular and direct contact with North Korean officials. From their perspective, as late as November of last year, officials in Pyongyang appeared unruffled by Trump’s “fire and fury” threats and little inclined to rush into

talks with the US. Nor were there any indications at this stage that North Korea had an appetite for dialogue with South Korea. Pyongyang's propaganda had avoided demonizing President Moon — a hopeful sign (in contrast to the tendency to malign and insult his predecessors as “lackeys” of the US), but the assumption was that the road to any peace settlement would have to run through Washington rather than Seoul. In this context, the most effective role for European actors would be at best to act as intermediaries (not mediators) for relaying messages to the US and perhaps to provide more fora for wider discussions with North Korean representatives who have shown an increased interest in recent months in engaging with a number of European partners, both governments and non-governmental institutions through a series of meetings at track 1.5 and track 2 level in a number of European capitals.

Such discussions will inevitably remain of limited effectiveness given the political primacy of Kim Jong Un and the challenge of identifying any sufficiently influential North Korean representatives who can speak meaningfully about its policy priorities. With the European Union's role limited to inter-institutional co-ordination rather than an agenda-setting role, it is doubtful that Europe and individual European countries can have any direct impact on promoting peace on the Korean Peninsula other than through supporting a unified campaign of pressure via sanctions, either bilaterally or through the United Nations, and by delivering a consistent message to the North on the need to suspend and ultimately dismantle its WMD program.

#### KEEP CAUTIOUS AND CARRY ON

In looking to the future, the final session of the roundtable was dominated by a cautionary attitude. On the one hand, contributors noted the difficulty of accurately forecasting future devel-

opments — a mundane but also prescient insight, given the surprise announcement of the Trump-Kim summit; on the other hand, there was a consensus that the international community was entering a period of maximum danger where the North Korean crisis was concerned. Notwithstanding the heightened expectations associated with the planned meetings of Moon and Kim in April and then Trump and Kim in May, this sense of anxiety seems well justified.

Regardless of how much Trump may be inclined confidently to view himself as the world's consummate dealmaker and negotiator, the complex and fundamental challenges posed by North Korea's nuclear capabilities are unlikely to be resolved by a single meeting. Even allowing for Trump's tendency to be sympathetic to authoritarian leaders — consider his positive attitudes towards figures such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Rodrigo Duterte and Vladimir Putin — any personal chemistry that may emerge between Trump and Kim is unlikely to be sufficient to overcome the deep-seated factors (linear and cyclical) that have led the international community to the current stand-off. Chance events and the contingent desire of individual leaders to make a difference may not be enough to offset the grave risks associated with the North Korean crisis. Regrettably, the collective pessimism of the Chatham House discussion may end up being justified, even allowing for the failure to predict the decision by Trump and Kim, temporarily at least, to seek a new understanding.

**John Nilsson-Wright is Senior Lecturer, University of Cambridge, Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia, Chatham House, and a regional editor for Global Asia.**