

## Rethinking North Korea: How bad would it be to let Kim Jong Un keep his nuclear weapons?

Jamie McIntyre

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If there's one thing approaching consensus among North Korea experts, it's that the likelihood that Kim Jong Un will eventually give up his nuclear weapons ranges somewhere between slim and slimmer.

That's not to say many veteran Korea watchers don't applaud President Trump's gambit in opening a personal dialog with Kim, as well as Trump's efforts to lower tensions by scaling back what Pyongyang sees as in-your-face military drills with South Korea.

But like Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama before him, Trump's hope of persuading the communist regime to forsake its nuclear ambitions failed.

As Trump's four-year term comes to a close, North Korea retains its entire nuclear enterprise, including a growing arsenal of an estimated 60 warheads and several new long-range missiles with the potential of striking the United States.

Maybe, some experts argue, it's time to give up on the idea of the total denuclearization of North Korea or, at the very least, recognize how long and what it may take to get there.

"This is a worthy objective, no question about it, but we have to ask ourselves if it is an achievable objective, seeing that we have been pursuing this now for decades," said Ted Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and co-author of the book *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea*.

"Policymakers," he said, "ought to consult the wisdom of the Rolling Stones song 'You Can't Always Get What You Want.'"

Carpenter was one of four eminent Korea experts brought together last month by the Center for the National Interest to ponder the question: Is it time to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state?

"In my personal view, [that would] be a disaster because it would lend itself to a nuclear arms race and the possibility of proliferation. But on the other hand, we have to be realistic," said Joseph DeTrani. He was a special envoy to the Six-Party Talks that produced a denuclearization agreement in 2005 that subsequently collapsed.

"North Korea is living in a tough neighborhood," DeTrani said. "They know without nuclear weapons they could be extremely vulnerable. And if you're the leadership, you're looking at regime survival. You're going to keep those nuclear weapons because that's your path to survive."

The biggest problem undercutting U.S. negotiations with Pyongyang, experts argue, is that over the past two decades, North Korea has seen what happens to America's adversaries that don't have nuclear weapons, in particular with the overthrow of Iraq's Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the demise of Libya's Moammar Gadhafi in 2011.

"Without nukes, North Korea is a very small, poor, largely inconsequential country. Acquiring a nuclear weapons capability puts it in a very different category," said Carpenter.

In Gadhafi's case, the Libyan leader gave up his nascent weapons program in 2004 only to be captured and killed by rebel forces 10 years later after NATO planes fired on his convoy during the Libyan civil war.

To North Korea, that smacks of betrayal.

But by the same token, U.S., British, and Russian territorial guarantees given to Ukraine in 1994 in exchange for its handover of 1,500 Soviet-era nuclear weapons similarly turned out to be worthless when Russia annexed Crimea in 2014.

"This is what we have to address in a very flexible way," said DeTrani. "It's not going to be a Libya model where you give everything up, and then we'll talk to you. And maybe, eventually, we'll lift sanctions, and maybe, eventually, have a normal relationship. It's got to be a more meaningful path."

The only way North Korea will relinquish its nuclear weapons is if it comes as an "end product" after years of normalization between Washington and Pyongyang, not, as the Trump administration demanded, as a nonnegotiable precondition, argued Carpenter, who called the "carrot" Trump offered Kim in his two summits, which comprised Singapore in 2018 and Hanoi in 2019, too "small, anemic, and moldy" to be effective.

"That carrot being that if North Korea agrees to return to nuclear virginity, the United States and its allies will then very gradually, very grudgingly begin to lift the system of sanctions. And at some point, in the midst of a distant future, North Korea will have a normal relationship with the rest of the international community."

"Essentially, U.S. policy has had the process backwards," Carpenter said. "We need to reverse that. We need to move to normalize relations with North Korea across a range of issues, including a formal treaty ending the Korean War, including the establishment of diplomatic relations between Pyongyang and Washington with a full exchange of ambassadors."

Robert Gallucci, chief U.S. negotiator of the Agreed Framework deal that ended the North Korea nuclear crisis of 1994 but then failed when it turned out Pyongyang was cheating, said the U.S. should not recognize North Korea as a nuclear state but rather treat it as a "threshold state" while continuing to pursue limits to its nuclear program.

"I favor continued pursuit of denuclearization with incremental steps at denuclearization matched by incremental steps at normalization," Gallucci said. "I oppose acceptance ... because of what I think it would mean for the nonnuclear status of our allies, the Republic of Korea and Japan, and what it would mean at the end of the day for the effort at preventing the spread of nuclear weapons globally."

Gallucci argued that the Trump goal, which went by the initialism CVID and demanded full capitulation upfront, was never realistic.

"The 'I' in CVID has always been nonsense. Comprehensive? Yes. Verified? Yes. Disarmament? Yes. Irreversible? Inconceivable. You don't shoot the scientists, and you don't burn all the plans. You can't make it irreversible."

Graham Allison, a professor of government at Harvard University, mentioned a few scenarios that would be worse than living with a nuclear-armed North Korea constrained by a treaty that would limit but not eliminate its weapons.

One would be allowing North Korea to continue building more and better bombs and missiles. Another would be if North Korea began selling nuclear weapons to terrorists or other countries. Even worse would be a second Korean War, potentially including China, with casualties at least in the hundreds of thousands on both sides.

And the worst-case eventuality would be a North Korea with a demonstrated capability to target the entire U.S. mainland, threatening nuclear blackmail or destruction of a major U.S. city.

"Nuclear weapons are exploding on American soil — that would be a worse day than accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state," Allison said.

In his latest book *Exercise of Power*, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates suggested:

"Perhaps, then, we should change the goal, lower our sights, and seek an agreement that limits the North's nuclear weapons arsenal to a minimal number of weapons; dismantles their capability to make more such weapons through either reprocessing or enrichment; bans all future testing of both nuclear devices and ballistic missiles; and establishes verification arrangements that provide reasonable assurance that these serial cheaters and liars do not cheat again."

Gates called it a "long shot" but said that even if it fails, the U.S. would be no worse off than it is now.

"I can hear hard-liners gasping in horror," he wrote, "but what alternative do they have to offer apart from a growing North Korean threat (the status quo) or a major war?"