

# VANITY FAIR

## “A Dog Whistle To The North Koreans”: Will Tump’s Ignorance (And Bolton’s Impetuosity) Doom The North Korea Summit?

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The biggest crowd, the tallest building, the best possible North Korean peace deal: it’s absolutely unsurprising that the salesman in chief is selling very hard. During a White House event on Monday, **Donald Trump** boldly claimed, “The United States has never been closer to potentially having something happen with respect to the Korean peninsula, that can get rid of the nuclear weapons, can create so many good things, so many positive things, and peace and safety for the world.”

But as he lobbies for a Nobel Prize, large parts of the foreign-policy establishment, along with many Korea experts, argue that he may be giving away the store, and wonder about the tactical wisdom of Trump’s negotiating, where he’s massively raised expectations for what a deal could achieve. “If you’re familiar with the history of these negotiations, **[Kim Jong Un]** has not even reaffirmed the more definitive statements about denuclearization that were used by the North Koreans in the past,” **Victor Cha**, who was seen as a contender to be U.S. ambassador to South Korea earlier this year, told me, noting that the Kim regime made similar promises before.

“My worry is that Kim thinks that he is getting to keep his nuclear weapons and being recognized as a nuclear power, as long as he follows certain rules,” sighed **Jeffrey Lewis**, the director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. “The president keeps acting like he is going to show up, and he is going to physically turn over all his weapons. That is a big mismatch in expectations.”

Which isn’t to say that a meeting with Kim isn’t a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. “While it does all seem too good to be true, I think it is a bona fide opening,” a former State Department official told me. “My guess is that the U.S.-D.P.R.K. summit won’t achieve a mega-breakthrough. In truth, it can’t. That would be the process of months of negotiations. But it probably will kick-

start the opportunity.” A current State Department staffer, who previously worked on the Korean desk, was less sanguine: “Ultimately, I just don’t see how you get there from here.”

It’s not surprising that Trump’s “great man” theory of history—Trump being the great man, of course—is viewed as far too simple among the diplomats he so disdains. Amid chants of “Nobel! Nobel! Nobel!” from the audience at a rally last month, Trump declared that he had “everything” to do with Kim’s acquiescence. But sources I spoke with downplayed the significance of Trump, himself. “Nothing in international relations happens for one reason,” said Cha. A foreign diplomatic official credited the United Nations Security Council, sanctions, and multilateralism. “No country, no matter how powerful, can impose peace alone,” they said. Lewis went so far as to label Trump “completely irrelevant,” arguing that Kim is only willing to talk because he has already achieved his family’s decades-long quest for nuclear capability. “North Korea would have finished the nuclear weapon and the I.C.B.M. with or without Trump, and once they did, that they would have turned around and offered [South Korean President **Moon Jae-in**] an inter-Korean summit, because they get all kind of goodies for that,” he told me.

Some say *why* Kim is coming to the table is unimportant. But Trump’s failure to recognize that Kim could be motivated by the advancements in his nuclear program suggests to others that he still doesn’t understand how the North Korean leader views the bomb—and, as a result, the improbability that he will give it up. After decades of working toward achieving nuclear capability, experts say, the notion of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula is likely wishful thinking. “The fact that they possess—and seem willing and ready to use—those weapons is what got them world attention and, eventually, got them a meeting with the president of the U.S.A.,” the former State Department official told me. “North Korea, in the end—they do want a peace treaty, and they do want normalization, but they want those things as a nuclear-weapon state,” Cha added. “They’re willing to part with some of their capability, but they’re certainly not willing to part with all of it. I mean, if you were North Korea, why would you want to [give up] what you’ve been developing for the past three decades?”

Kim, meanwhile, seems to have done his homework. “At the age of 34, he’s really mature. He didn’t need help from aides or assistants” when he met President Moon at the D.M.Z. last week, observed a South Korean presidential adviser speaking to **Robin Wright** of *The New Yorker*. “Moon was quite surprised.” The North Korean leader has also played a savvy hand, winning major diplomatic concessions, even as he has yet to make any substantive concessions of his own. All he has done, Lewis said, is “endorse the kind of vague principle of the elimination of nuclear weapons, in much the same way that **President [Barack] Obama** did in Prague,” when the former U.S. president outlined a vision for a nuclear-weapon-free world. “It represents kind of a recognition of his nuclear status. He gets to keep the weapons as long as he says, sort of abstractly, that he is in favor of getting rid of them someday—and then live within certain limitations, like no testing, not exporting the technology. But it serves as a de facto recognition of his nuclear status.”

Besides Trump and Kim and Moon, a fourth crucial player in this negotiation is liable to be Trump’s newly minted national security adviser, **John Bolton**, who was involved in the failed negotiations with North Korea during the **George W. Bush** administration. Bolton has a

famously hawkish mien, and a very dim and oft-stated view of the North Koreans' honesty and the prospects for peace. This is why Bolton's reference to the disarmament of Libya near the turn of the century, while he was making the rounds on the cable-news shows last Sunday, was so avidly interpreted. "We have very much in mind the Libya model from 2003, 2004," he said on *Fox News Sunday*. "There are obviously differences. The Libyan program was much smaller, but that was basically the agreement that we made." Along with Saddam Hussein's similar decision to give up Iraq's nuclear program in the 1990s, Muammar Qaddafi's gruesome death after he agreed to disarm Libya is an object lesson for North Korea in what happens when a leader acquiesces to international pressures.

Much as they see Trump's current premature victory lap as dangerously naïve, diplomats I have spoken with tend to view Bolton as a dire threat to real peace. "Libya is not the appropriate case study for anyone who actually wants to secure a peaceful diplomatic arrangement on North Korea's nuclear program," **John Glaser**, the director of foreign-policy studies at the Cato Institute, explained. "In 2004, in talks with the United States, Libya gave up a pitifully undeveloped enrichment program . . . in exchange for some meager economic benefits. That turned out to be a fateful decision for Qaddafi when the U.S. and its European allies served as an air force for Libyan rebels, who later sodomized Qaddafi with a knife, beat him in the streets, and shot him dead, marking the final end to him and his regime." Pyongyang, he added, "took special note of the Libyan case, and they have since pointed to it as part of the reason they continued to pursue a viable nuclear-deterrent capability—because it is the only true assurance against U.S.-led invasion, attack, and regime change."

The Libya reference was construed by some as an attempt by Bolton—who has previously advocated a pre-emptive military strike against Pyongyang—to sabotage the talks with North Korea by raising the president's expectations. "The Trump comments on Iran and the Bolton comments on Libya aren't helpful on the face of it. But maybe provide some hint to the D.P.R.K. that we won't be overly flexible or generous in discussing the nuclear issue with them," said the former State Department official, who overlapped with Bolton during his time in Foggy Bottom. But whatever its purpose, this person stressed that it was not an off-the-cuff remark. "John Bolton is very strategic, very tough, and unlikely to say things unless he's thought it through."

A current administration official offered a starker assessment of Bolton's remarks. "I mean, there is only one reason you would ever bring up Libya to the North Koreans, and that is to tell them, 'Warning: don't go any further because we are going to screw you,'" they told me. "So yeah, I completely agree that that is a dog whistle to the North Koreans, telling them, 'don't trust us.'"

By invoking Libya, Bolton could also be playing bad cop to Trump's Nobel peacenik, telegraphing that it is a fully denuclearized North Korea or nothing, as the Trump administration enters a new-era of hard-line, hawkish diplomacy. Bolton's predecessor, **H.R. McMaster**, and former secretary of state **Rex Tillerson**, were largely viewed as measured, if not moderate, voices in the administration, and seen as bulwarks against Trump's worst impulses on foreign policy. The appointments of Bolton to lead the National Security Council and former C.I.A. director **Mike Pompeo** to State—both of whom, along with ambassador to the United Nations **Nikki Haley**, are known to harbor hawkish views—have been met with apprehension in

the diplomatic community. This has left Secretary of Defense **James Mattis** in a league of his own on a number of foreign-policy issues, perhaps the most contentious of which is the Iran nuclear accord.

Pulling out of the Iran deal, as Trump is widely expected to do later this month, would send another ominous message about the meaning of American treaties. With McMaster gone and Chief of Staff **John Kelly** largely sidelined, Mattis is the Iran deal's last defender—Bolton, of course, has long advocated for ending it. “On the multilateral side, I think the imminent renunciation of the Iran deal sends a bad signal . . . How do we establish that and trust it, if we tear up the Iran deal?” the current State Department staffer told me. “It boggles the mind to see how you do something like that—the alternative is you ignore all the complications or paper it over. Either way, it ends in tears.”

On Monday, Trump dismissed the idea that pulling out of the Iran deal sends the wrong message to North Korea amid the negotiations. “No, I think it sends the right message,” he replied, when a reporter asked. Cha offered his own interpretation of Trump's logic: “I think this administration looks at pulling out of the Iran deal as not hurting the North Korea negotiation, but instead signaling very clearly to the North Koreans that a partial denuclearization like the Iran deal is not acceptable to the Trump administration,” he explained. “I think he's actually saying to the North Koreans, ‘You have to do better than the Iran deal. Don't think you can get an Iran deal.’”

It is unclear whether the Kim regime will perceive the right message. “I heard directly from the Chinese that the Libyan model did not inspire confidence in Pyongyang,” **Antony Blinken**, who served as deputy secretary of state under Obama, told *The New York Times*. “I would be very concerned that the combination of Libya and then Trump tearing up the Iran agreement sends exactly the wrong message to Kim Jong Un and undermines whatever hope exists for negotiations.”

According to sources I spoke with, a best-case scenario might not include the nuke-free North Korea Trump has been pitching to American voters. “The optimist in me wonders if we can't get something that falls short of that, but still reduces the threat and maybe moves the D.P.R.K. closer to being a responsible nation,” the former State Department official told me. Senator **Ben Cardin** expanded on the premise. “If we can really get diplomacy to work, let's advance it, but recognize, if you believe that he's going to turn in his nuclear weapons in the next six months, it's not going to happen. That's unrealistic. Could we get inspections to make sure he's really freezing a program? I think that's realistic,” he told me. “Ultimately, you want to get some help to the people of North Korea. It's one of the worst human-rights countries in the world, and we can't normalize that. So as we deal with the immediate crisis of the nuclear, don't lose sight that there's more than nuclear that has to be resolved for North Korea to be a stable nation in that region.”

But if Bolton convinces Trump that a nuclear Korea is untenable, we may soon be back on track for military conflict. On Friday, he icily denied reports that Trump is pushing for a U.S. troop reduction in South Korea, characterizing a recent *New York Times* story to that effect as “utter

nonsense.” Of course, if Trump is set on a Nobel, we might have hope still. “You can’t trust Kim Jong Un, and you know the impulsive nature of President Trump, so it is very fragile—but I think this is the best chance, and I’m rooting for President Trump and Kim Jong Un and President Moon,” Cardin told me. “I’m rooting for them all to get this done, and we’ll do everything we can to help support this effort.”