

What Kim is thinking: We can get inside the head of North Korea's leader if we read the signs

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After an extended period of silence since the failure of the U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi, a flurry of activity and statements by North Korea's leadership has clarified their post-summit game plan. A major speech by Kim Jong Un to the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA), a rhetorical fusillade against U.S. secretary of state Mike Pompeo by North Korea's ministry of foreign affairs, and an upcoming summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin were especially important developments.

These three actions show that Kim is still open to diplomacy with the United States, but he will pressure President Trump to change U.S. demands while simultaneously hedging his bets and preparing for an outcome where Trump doesn't lift sanctions.

Kim's silence after the Hanoi summit led to a period of uncertainty and speculation. Choe Son Hui, a high-ranking North Korean foreign ministry official, was vocal after the summit and warned that Kim might reverse a moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear weapons testing. Choe's comments coincided with signs of activity at a North Korean satellite launch facility, but there was no rocket launch and Kim did not personally reveal his calculations.

Kim's address to the SPA is the first time he has publicly laid out his assessment of the Hanoi summit's collapse and his view of the path forward.

In the speech, Kim said that North Korea came to Hanoi prepared to take "prudent and trustworthy measures" to build on the joint statement agreed to at the first U.S.-North Korea summit in Singapore. However, he regarded the Trump administration's push for a bigger deal at Hanoi as "absolutely impractical." Given this experience at the last summit, Kim is unwilling to meet with Trump again unless the United States "adopts a correct posture and comes forward...with a certain methodology that can be shared with [North Korea]."

In other words, North Korea is still open to dialogue with the United States if Trump drops the idea of a big deal. Kim probably wants to move to a step-for-step approach where the United States relaxes sanctions in exchange for North Korean actions toward denuclearization.

An example of this approach was on the table at the Hanoi summit. North Korea proposed to dismantle its nuclear facilities at Yongbyon in exchange for relaxing sanctions that hindered inter-Korean economic projects. The summit fell apart after the details of the exchange couldn't be worked out, including U.S. concerns about the unclear scope of dismantlement activities that would happen after loosening sanctions.

The North Korean foreign ministry's criticism of Pompeo and the call to replace him with a different negotiator underscore the points in Kim's speech about his desire for a change in the U.S. position. Both Kim and Kwon Jong Gun, the foreign ministry official who wrote the news release blasting Pompeo, directed their criticism at other U.S. officials rather than Trump

himself, which has been a feature of North Korean statements since the Singapore summit. Kim clearly sees other officials like Pompeo and John Bolton as impediments to the step-for-step approach. If these voices can be diminished, the thinking goes, then Trump may be more amenable to Kim's preferred course of action.

Finally, the upcoming summit between Kim and Putin indicates that Kim is trying to keep his options open and hedge against a scenario where Trump refuses to budge on sanctions relief unless Kim surrenders his nuclear weapons first. Russia won't be able to lift UN sanctions on North Korea given America's veto in the Security Council, but Putin could be lax about implementing sanctions. While such support wouldn't allow Kim to achieve his top domestic goal of economic development, it could provide enough resources to keep the North Korean economy somewhat stable. Getting UN sanctions lifted is still Kim's most important priority, but a Russian lifeline would be a big help until that happens.

North Korea clearly assumes that time is on its side. Nuclear weapons provide a measure of insurance against regime change and the more time passes without any kinds of restraints on the North's nuclear program the more warheads and missiles it can build. But North Korean intransigence could also backfire in the long run by making subsequent American and South Korean leaders wary of diplomatic engagement and supportive of greater pressure.

The most important development in nuclear diplomacy from this point forward will be which party moves away from their maximal position first. Shifting the United States toward a step-for-step approach while retaining the long-term goal of denuclearization could be the best way forward, as it could satisfy Kim's requirements for a new approach while retaining America's ultimate objective.

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