

The Emperor's Dignity: A Candid Primer on Korean Reunification

Written by Thomas J. Ward

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THOMAS J. WARD, MAY 12 2021

In 2018 North Korean Leader Kim Jong-un confessed to his South Korean counterparts that he wanted to 'write a new history of national reunification' and that he planned to do so peacefully. Kim did not enter into specifics on whether this new history could accommodate democracy and rule of law. In August 2019 Kim's South Korean counterpart, President Moon Jae-in, again without detailing the future framework of governance, set 2045 as the deadline for the peaceful reunification of the Koreas. 2045 will mark the centennial of Japan's surrender and the de facto liberation of Korea from Japan's imperial rule. Since his inauguration as President in 2017, Moon has not hesitated to evoke Seoul's and Pyongyang's shared reservations towards Japan. Moon reflects the views of most of his countrymen when he says that Japan has not taken sufficient responsibility for the injustices, humiliation, and suffering that Koreans endured during Japan's half-century takeover of the country, which opened with the assassination of Korea's Queen Min by Japanese forces in 1895, followed by Japan's imposition of the 1905 Eulsa Treaty of Protection on the Korean government, which led to the full annexation of Korea into Imperial Japan from 1910 until Japan's surrender to Allied Forces in August 1945.

Japan's annexation of Korea gained international acceptance and legitimacy with American support through the Treaty of Portsmouth of 1905, which effectively ended the Russo-Japanese War over territory and suzerainty. President Theodore Roosevelt played the pivotal role in these negotiations. Those efforts led to him being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1906. Still today Japan is viewed as a perennial 'bad actor' by most South Koreans. In a 2017 poll conducted by Japan's Genro group, 56.1% of Koreans stated that they had a negative view of Japan and 48.6% of Japanese have a negative view of Korea. In an August 2019 Statista poll, only 12% of South Koreans described themselves as having a positive view of Japan; 77% indicated that they had a negative view. In 2019 the Japan Times reported that 45% of South Koreans would support North Korea should conflict ever break out between Pyongyang and Japan. While President Moon frequently references the unsettled differences stemming from Japan's occupation and annexation of Korea and he aspires for Korean reunification, Moon's administration has not provided a plan for unification, which would require navigating the longstanding roadblocks and minefields that curtail the process. Here we consider two of the principal obstacles: North Korea's nuclear arsenal and the fate of Kim Jong-un following its dismantling.

Roadblock #1: The Nuclear Issue

So long as North Korea remains both an unrepentant one-party dictatorship and a growing nuclear power, Japan, and the United States, two of the key players whose buy-in is crucial for the reunification of the peninsula, will continue to insist that Pyongyang must first end its production of nuclear weapons and surrender its extant stockpile of said weapons. Estimates run from as low as 30 to 40 to a projection of up to 250 nuclear weapons by 2027.

There is no convincing evidence that Kim Jong-un or any of the key players surrounding him have ever had plans to surrender their stockpiled weapons. A leaked North Korean document released in 2019 revealed that Kim Jong-un had informed top DPRK leaders that he will 'dominate the world with the nuclear weapons, will make the U.S. apologize and compensate for us for decades of bullying our people, and will declare to the entire world that the world's powerful order will be reshaped by the Juche-Korea, not the United States.' Kim, who shared these views

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with high ranking leaders shortly before traveling to Hanoi for his failed second summit with then U.S. President Donald, seems to have anticipated that the Hanoi Summit would be the moment for striking 'a final deal' that would lead to the United States accepting that Pyongyang remain a 'global nuclear strategic state.' Clearly a gap existed between Kim's and Trump's expectations, as evidenced in the collapse of the Hanoi Talks.

As Korea specialist Mark Setton once described it, nuclear weapons are a 'status symbol' for Pyongyang, something they will not easily relinquish. Nuclear weapons alone have allowed the DPRK to join an elite set of nations, a club which they do not wish to leave.

Stumbling Block #2 The Fate of Kim Jong-un in a Post-Nuclear North Korea

Kim Il Sung once observed:

It is unnatural to advocate peaceful reunification and hold a dialogue with a dagger in one's belt. Unless the dagger is laid on the table, it is impossible to create an atmosphere of mutual trust or find satisfactory solutions to any national reunification problems, whether large or small, including that of achieving cooperation and interchange between north and south (1973, p. 338).

The late DPRK Chairman and Founder could justifiably be faulted for wavering on this principle. On January 20, 1992 his government and the government of South Korea signed a Joint Declaration not to 'test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy, or use nuclear weapons; to use nuclear energy solely for peaceful purposes; and not to possess facilities for nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment' precisely at a time moment when his government was already actively engaged in enriching uranium and well on the way to becoming a nuclear power. North Korea's 'daggers' frequently must be detected not on but *under* the table. The intelligence officers of Pyongyang's rivals, as well as defectors and informants help to uncover them. The 2019 leaked DPRK memorandum quoted by *Voice of America* states that 'the Korea People's Army must firmly hold the nuclear weapons as our all-around security sword to protect the revolutionary leadership like an impregnable fortress.'

In the first Trump-Kim summit that took place in June 2018 in Singapore, 'the world's most competitive economy,' Trump had hoped to signal to Kim that a Pyongyang without nuclear weapons could enjoy a bright economic future, similar to Singapore's or even Seoul's. Did President Trump actually believe that that Kim, his family, and the coterie who surrounded them were naïve enough to believe that they would be at the helm of such an enterprise if they surrendered their nuclear weapons? Those weapons are their only real leverage vis-à-vis Japan, the United States, the Republic of Korea, and the human rights and civil society organizations calling for Kim to be brought justice for crimes against humanity.

The DPRK document leaked to VOA points to Pyongyang's reliance on a two-faced approach to nuclear diplomacy. In Kim's messages targeting foreign powers, he expresses an 'unwavering commitment for the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula' but within his inner circle, Kim makes clear that he intends 'to achieve the final outcome of raising the [North Korea's] status as a world class nuclear force nation.'

Kim Jong-un's track record of human rights abuses and war crimes reflects the policies of his forbears Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il and the accounts of these abuses will certainly move to the front-page of the world press should the nuclear threat no longer be a center of media attention. Prior to the first US-DPRK Nuclear Summit in 2018, the *New York Times* reported that human rights activists were 'watching for Mr. Trump to bring up North Korea's widespread crimes against humanity.' The *Times* reported that Pyongyang numbered among 'the worst human rights violators in the world.' It cites a 2014 United Nations report on the DPRK detailing how Kim Jong-un's crimes include 'extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment, rape, forced abortions and other sexual violence, persecution on political, religious, racial and gender grounds, the forcible transfer of populations, the enforced disappearance of persons and the inhumane act of knowingly causing prolonged starvation.' The *Times* added that Kim's acts have been very personal; 'family is also not off limits. One of Mr. Kim's uncles, Jang Song-thaek, was convicted of treason. He was then executed with anti-aircraft machine guns, and his body was incinerated with the flame-throwers.'

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Kim maintains that 'the value of North Korea as a model of revolutionary success will become self-evident for all the nations of the world.' In reality, what has become 'self-evident' to the world is that the Kims' Orwellian experiment, however noble the original intent, has advanced at the blatant sacrifice of human rights. Kim's record of crimes against humanity will undoubtedly become Kim's critics' top priority should Pyongyang surrender its nuclear arsenal.

How can we expect Kim Jong-un to give up his only 'Get out of Jail' card, knowing that the day after he does so, his critics will clamor for a Nuremberg-style trial for him and his entourage in Pyongyang or Seoul or for his extradition to the International Criminal Court at the Hague to face trial for crimes against humanity?

Should the demands for atonement for the DPRK's long history of flagrant human rights violations be put on permanent hold to prevent nuclear attacks on Seoul, Pusan, Incheon, Tokyo, and Osaka by an unrepentant Kim Jong-un who, faced with a military confrontation, could realize that he has 'nothing to lose' in unleashing his nuclear arsenal on his enemies? Can we address the North Korean nuclear issue without factoring in Kim's concern for the clamors for justice that his surrender of the DPRK nuclear codes will trigger?

Back in late May and June of 1992, I had the opportunity to accompany a delegation of former high ranking US Government officials to North Korea. The delegation included John Holdridge, former United States Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia; Ambassador Douglas MacArthur II, the former United States Ambassador to Japan; Max Hugel, former Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence; and other former top US officials under the leadership of retired US Congressman Richard Ichord. Our delegation traveled to Pyongyang with the support of George H.W. Bush and his National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft.

Congressman Ichord met with Mr. Scowcroft at the White House prior to our departure, and he met with both Mr. Scowcroft and President Bush on our return from Pyongyang. The focus of this Track II Diplomatic Initiative was to seek, as a measure of good faith, a reduction of the abusive rhetoric hurled at the United States and at Seoul by Pyongyang. The visit led to the first suspension ever of Pyongyang's annual 'Hate America' Month, which takes place in North Korea every year between June 25 (the starting date of the Korean War in 1950) and July 27 (the date of the signing of the 1953 truce that ended most hostilities on the Korean peninsula). I served as Congressman Ichord's representative in those discussions and spent an extra week in Pyongyang on my own in June 1992.

As one token of appreciation for the delegation's visit, the North Koreans prepared a video tape for each of us. The video included a recording of our visit to the Demilitarized Zone and to Panmungak Hall, the main North Korean administrative building in the Panmunjom area. When I watched my video, I discovered that the tape that I received had been recorded over an earlier taping of CNN coverage of Operation Desert Storm.

Nations, multilateral institutions, and civil society organizations championing denuclearization or human rights in North Korea would be naïve if they ignored how much the fates of Saddam Hussein and Moammar Qaddafi who both surrendered their nuclear ambitions, have been tracked by Pyongyang. North Koreans are certainly conscious of what the United States (or China for that matter) could do in virtually no time whatsoever to destroy and unravel the Juche experiment. They understand that Kim Dynasty's 'Juche Dream' can best be prolonged through maintaining the DPRK nuclear weapons arsenal.

The Hirohito Option?

In 2019 I was fortunate to have Korea and Japan expert Alexis Dudden advise me on an article that I was writing. Soon after, I invited her to speak on Korea-Japan relations to our students at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. During the dinner that my faculty and I shared with Professor Dudden prior to the event, we discussed the future of North Korea and everyone concurred that a major obstacle to denuclearization would be the post-nuclear fate of Kim Jong-un.

Prof. Dudden speculated at one point that lessons might be learned from how the United States chose to handle Emperor Hirohito following World War II. Hirohito certainly bore some level of responsibility for the aggressions unleashed by Japan between 1937 and 1945. We know, for example, Hirohito was briefed by Japanese leadership

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prior to Japan's air attack on Pearl Harbor. Furthermore, during the War years, the Emperor was repeatedly photographed in military garb, messaging his endorsement of Japan's military campaigns. Hirohito was certainly not the driver of the conflict. Nevertheless, as the sign on Harry S. Truman's desk reminded every visitor to his Oval Office, the maximum leader is where the 'buck stops.'

General Douglas MacArthur insisted on the rescinding of the Emperor's status as a Deity; however, following their September 27, 1945 meeting in his office, he also determined not to prosecute the Emperor. That decision by MacArthur facilitated Japan joining the family of democratic states in the Post War period rather than remaining recalcitrant.

In the case of North Korea, is there a place for what we might refer to as the 'Hirohito Solution?' Kim Jong-un and the Juche Nomenclatura surrounding him may admittedly never agree to surrender North Korea's weapons no matter what accommodations are made. However, our bottom-line understanding should be that, without a guarantee of amnesty for Kim Jong-un and the key figures who surround him, discussion will not go anywhere.

The late Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was offered asylum in Bahrain and elsewhere but he determined that he would not be exiled from Iraq. That decision would eventually cost him his life and lead to the second Gulf War. Would Kim Jong-un, like Saddam, opt to stay and attempt to maintain power no matter what? He might very well choose that option. The refusal to budge on his nuclear stockpiling plus his resistance towards any effort to unseat him as Leader might make military confrontation inevitable.

Because Kim Jong-un may refuse to go into exile, one must ask, whether there is value in allowing Kim Jong-un to remain in North Korea with a symbolic role that preserves some of his dignity? What price are we willing to pay to encourage the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Korea to surrender its nuclear weapons? Can we forego a human rights tribunal for Kim Jong-un to prevent a nuclear holocaust? Could Kim serve, for example, along with a South Korean former head of state, perhaps President Moon Jae-in, as Honorary Co-Chairs of the Korean National Reunification Advisory Commission or in some similar advisory role?

When Boris Yeltsin was welcomed to address a Joint Session of the United States Congress on June 11, 1992, he proudly declared that his administration, which had abandoned the Communist Party and sworn its commitment to a multi-party democracy, decided to deal with communist leaders not with show trials but by allowing any cases to work their way through the legal system. Yeltsin explained his decision as follows:

Last year citizens of Russia passed another difficult test of maturity. We chose to forego vengeance and the intoxicating craving for summary justice over the fallen colossus known under the name of the CPSU. There was no replay of history. The Communist Party citadel next to the Kremlin, the Communist Bastille, was not destroyed. There was not a hint of violence against communists in Russia. People simply brushed off the venomous dust of the past and went about their business. There was [sic] no lynch law trials in Russia.

Certainly, in Russia's case, the lenience towards former Soviet leaders does not appear to have produced the same outcome as in Japan. Longstanding Communist Party General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev remained in power from 1964 to 1982, second to Josef Stalin's rule of almost thirty years. If one includes the four-year period that Dmitri Medvedev shared leadership with Vladimir Putin through the so-called 'tandemocracy,' Mr. Putin has been in power since 1999, already longer than Brezhnev. If his health remains with him, he may very well exceed Stalin's tenure in office. There are risks in dealing with a foe with largesse. In the case of Japan, that decision worked favorably and continues to do so until present. However, can one say the same for the former Soviet Union?

Abandoning his plan for nuclear weapons, Moammar Qaddafi naively anticipated that he would be welcomed back to the community of nations. During the Arab Spring, following a punishing air attack by France, Britain, and the United States, and the incremental erosion of his military and security forces, Qaddafi met his fate at the hands of an angry mob who expeditiously dispatched him to his Maker. Kim Jong-un is not interested in facing a similar fate. He clearly appreciates that his extant nuclear arsenal assures that, if he must go, he can at least do so on his own terms. Were he ever to surrender his weapons, Kim would almost certainly anticipate not only amnesty but the right to remain in

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his homeland and serve as a prominent participant in the Korean reunification process.

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