

Don't be Cynical about an Olympics Detente with North Korea

Both sides are sending subtle signals that more than the games may be opening today.

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Global Research, February 11, 2018

[The American Conservative](#) 9 February 2018

Region: [Asia](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Military and WMD](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Featured image: The torch of the 2018 Olympic Games. (Source: [Ververididis Vasilis/Shutterstock](#))

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has [left](#) open the possibility of **Vice President Mike Pence** meeting with North Korean officials during his trip to the Winter Olympic games in Seoul, whose opening ceremonies are on Friday. If that happens, Pence would be the highest ranking American official ever to huddle with a delegation from Pyongyang.

At the same time, North Korea is planning to send its highest ranking official ever to the South—[Kim Yong-nam](#), the North's ceremonial head of state and president of the Supreme People's Assembly. In addition, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un's influential sister, **Kim Yo-jong**, [will also be joining the delegation](#), the first time an immediate Kim family member will have set foot in the South.

Is this the long shot diplomatic opening we've been waiting for?

It's easy to be cynical, but I look at this from a unique position. I've stared down the barrel of a gun held by a fanatical North Korean spy and watched her blink. It's why, watching the run-up to the Olympics, amidst levels of cooperation and [kinship](#) unseen for years between the two Koreas, I find myself allowing optimism to peek in between the shades.

The details must remain a bit sketchy but at one point during my years working for the State Department at the American Embassy in Seoul, I found myself inside a cell of a foreign intelligence organization alone with a North Korean spy. I'll call her Miss Park, though I have no idea if even her "real" name was real (other identity details have been altered below). She'd been arrested for espionage. She was on a hunger strike.

I was there because Miss Park may have acquired American citizenship along her complex life journey and one of my jobs at the embassy was to look after the welfare of incarcerated American citizens. Miss Park was trying to starve herself to death to avoid cooperating and it was my task to provide her the same assistance as I would to any other American in jail: to convince her not to die.

Over a handful of visits with a nurse employed by the embassy, I watched Miss Park deny herself food. She was trained to do so. She took small sips of water, she explained, to keep

her higher brain functions active enough to allow her to push back against the survival instinct. She was unshakable in her loyalty to her cause. She told me she would begin to give up secrets if she lived long enough, and everything she'd devoted her life to said she should kill herself to prevent that from happening.

Miss Park came not to trust me, but at least to understand that my role was not to pry information from her. So we spoke of family, mine at first to fill the air, then eventually hers. Her son liked the elites' amusement park he'd once had access to. There was a day when Miss Park bought him shaved ice, some sweet flavor that reminded her of the fruits she'd eaten in the West but which her son had never tasted in real life. As the embassy nurse whispered to me that the prisoner's vital signs were reaching a critical point and that we should schedule a second visit that afternoon "in case," I saw Miss Park stare down the angel of death. Then she asked for rice.

Ms. Park is just one person, but she is exactly the kind of person you would least expect to change. She is one of the reasons I continue to believe there is a path that will not lead to war on the Korean Peninsula.

The essence of North Korea is written into its national philosophy of [juche](#), which above all emphasizes survival. The Kim family has been remarkably good at that since 1948. They've endured total war, the collapse of their patron the Soviet Union, famine, natural disasters, and decades of sanctions. North Korea exists under a survivalist philosophy, not an apocalyptic one. A senior Central Intelligence Agency official has [confirmed](#) that **Kim Jong-un**'s actions are those of a "rational actor" motivated to ensure regime survival.

"Waking up one morning and deciding he wants to nuke Los Angeles is not something Kim is likely to do," the official said. "He wants to rule for a long time and die peacefully in his own bed."

The path to some form of peaceful co-existence on the Korean Peninsula lies in understanding survival, and that means North Korea can never denuclearize, a precondition the United States has insisted on before negotiations can move forward. If denuclearization was ever possible, perhaps through some form of security guarantee, the chances were reduced in March 2003 when **Saddam Hussein**, who had lost his weapons of mass destruction, found his country invaded by the United States. And the possibility evaporated completely when, after **Moammar Gaddafi** agreed to eliminate Libya's [nuclear weapons program](#), he was driven out of power by American bombs in 2011.

One Korea University professor has [argued](#) that Pyongyang's leaders felt "deeply satisfied with themselves" after Gaddafi's fall. In North Korea's [view](#), the Libyans "took the economic bait, foolishly disarmed themselves, and once they were defenseless, were mercilessly punished by the West." Only a national leader bent on [suicide](#) would negotiate away his nukes after that.

The last serious attempt at finding a path [forward](#) with North Korea was in October 2000, when then-secretary of state **Madeline Albright** [went](#) to Pyongyang without preconditions. A flurry of quiet diplomatic activity followed (I was at the embassy in Seoul and saw it first-hand) as both sides began building the connective tissue, the working-level personal and bureaucratic ties essential to getting down to business. One outcome was a series of extraordinary family reunions between North and South, among relatives who had not seen

each other since the 1950s. Those reunions were major media events in the South.

Enthusiasm from the American side dipped sharply after the election of **George W. Bush**, and the process collapsed completely in 2002 after Bush chucked North Korea into his “[Axis of Evil](#)” alongside Iraq and Iran. The last attempt to restart talks took place in February 2012, soon after **Kim Jong-il** passed away and Kim Jong-un, his son, took over. Washington and Pyongyang held limited discussions resulting in a [moratorium](#) on long-range missile launches, nuclear tests, and other activities. The agreement fell apart following a (failed) North Korean satellite launch, and a later successful nuclear test in February 2013. Diplomacy has otherwise not been tried much over the last five years.

Why might there be hope now? Since 2013, North Korea’s ability to deliver more powerful weapons via more accurate missiles has grown. Through one lens, that increases the threat to the United States. (Seoul, within range of overwhelming numbers of conventional weapons, is none the worse; their destruction was assured even prior to the North going nuclear.) Looking at it from Pyongyang’s perspective, however, offers a different picture: the more powerful weapons create a more realistic deterrent. To a regime that values survival at its core, that means a very different starting point for negotiations than in 2000.

The second factor is a long shot: Trump. The president seems unworried about maintaining a consistent policy position. He favors showmanship, the Big Play. His conservative flank is covered. One can imagine him being convinced his legacy could be that of Nixon opening China, the tarnished president who nonetheless is remembered for changing history.

The key lies in removing the [precondition](#) that any talks be aimed at denuclearization, and in understanding that diplomacy is never going to be a straight line. That setbacks will occur cannot be a predetermined definition of failure. Among other complications, Kim Jong-un will need to work any progress with America past the hardliners in his government.



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence(L) and Fred Warmbier(C), the father of Otto warmbier who was imprisoned in North Korea (Source: WCPO.com)

Kim Jong-un is indeed North Korea's supreme ruler, but to imagine he rules without consultation from, at minimum, his generals, is simplistic. Sending the 90-year-old Kim Yong-nam as his representative to the Olympics is a significant choice: Kim has been a Communist Party member since the pre-World War II Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula, has served all three North Korean rulers, was formerly minister of foreign affairs, has extensive overseas experience, and as a veteran of the 1950 war, has unimpeachable credibility inside the government. The U.S. has also carefully and quietly kept Kim Yong-nam [off](#) any sanctions list, ostensibly because he is not directly involved in nuclear development.

Despite that level of bureaucratic protection, Kim Jong-un will still need to balance conciliatory steps forward with bellicose gestures directed at a limited but important domestic hardline audience. Perhaps that's not unlike Trump, who may be covering his own hand by sending [Fred Warmbier](#), the father of student **Otto Warmbier** who died after being incarcerated by Pyongyang and returning to the U.S. in a coma, to attend the Olympics alongside Pence.

North Korea is a nuclear state. That is the starting point to any deconfliction on the Korean Peninsula, not the end goal. Finding peace under those conditions is a long shot, but sometimes taking a risk pays off.

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