

How the Media Wove a Narrative of North Korean Nuclear Deception

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Since the June 12 Singapore Summit between US President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, the US media has woven a misleading narrative that both past and post-summit North Korean actions indicate an intent to deceive the US about its willingness to denuclearize. The so-called intelligence that formed the basis of these stories was fed to reporters by individuals within the administration pushing their own agenda.

The Case of the Secret Uranium Enrichment Sites

In late June and early July, a series of press stories portrayed a North Korean policy of deceiving the United States by keeping what were said to be undeclared uranium enrichment sites secret from the United States. The stories were published just as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was preparing for the first meetings with North Korean officials to begin implementing the Singapore Summit Declaration.

The first such story appeared on [NBC News](#) on June 29, which reported:

U.S. intelligence agencies believe that North Korea has increased its production of fuel for nuclear weapons at multiple secret sites in recent months—and that Kim Jong Un may try to hide those facilities as he seeks more concessions in nuclear talks with the Trump administration.

NBC News reporters quoted one official as saying, “There is absolutely unequivocal evidence that they are trying to deceive the U.S.” They further reported that the intelligence assessment “concludes that there is more than one secret site” for enrichment.

The story was highly problematic because it reported the alleged conclusion of the intelligence report as a fact, even though it admitted that *NBC* reporters had not seen or been briefed in detail on any part of the intelligence assessment in question, but had relied entirely on general statements by unnamed officials. Furthermore, none of the officials on whom they relied were identified as members of the intelligence community.

Significantly, the story did not indicate whether the assessment was endorsed by the entire US intelligence community or—as turned out to be the case—only one element of it. Normal journalistic practice would have made clear that *NBC* was passing on an unconfirmed

conclusion the accuracy of which they were unable to verify. Instead, the *NBC* reporters played up the alleged conclusion as unambiguous evidence that US intelligence believed the North Koreans intended to deceive the United States by maintaining secret enrichment facilities under a future agreement with the United States.

The Washington Post published [a report](#) by national security and intelligence reporters Ellen Nakashima and Joby Warrick the day after the *NBC* story that paralleled its main thrust and cited the same unnamed intelligence sources that were cited in the *NBC* story. But the *Post* also revealed that the intelligence assessment in question had come from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), which is generally recognized as an outlier within the intelligence community on most assessments of adversary capabilities and intentions. A former senior intelligence official with extensive experience dealing with DIA assessments explained in an interview with this writer that the DIA “would tend to put a worse-case spin” on any analysis of North Korean intentions.

That makes it all the more important to know whether the rest of the intelligence community agrees with the reported assessment of North Korean intentions. Nakashima and Warrick seemed to suggest that there is no doubt in the intelligence community that the North Koreans “have operated a secret underground enrichment site known as Kangsong,” and they linked to an earlier *Post* report on that alleged secret enrichment site published May 25.

That earlier *Post* story quoted a former senior US official as saying that intelligence agencies had “long suspected the existence of such a facility” and believed there were “probably” others as well. But a [PowerPoint](#) on the Kangsong issue by David Albright, the founder and CEO of the Institute for Science and International Security, makes it clear that US intelligence lacks hard evidence to support such suspicions. Albright, a former UN weapons inspector, revealed that the original allegation of the secret enrichment plant had come from a North Korean defector who said he had “worked near the site,” clearly implying that he had inferred the purpose of the site without having been inside it.

More importantly, according to Albright, “we have not located this site,” meaning that the US intelligence community still did not have a specific location for the suspected plant eight years after the defector was obviously asked to provide it. Albright further disclosed that some US intelligence analysts and senior officials of at least one foreign government have challenged the belief that the building in question was an enrichment site, because, “some aspects of the building are not consistent with a centrifuge plant.” And he recalled that other alleged covert enrichment facilities had been suggested to his organization, but that he viewed them as “less credible than the information about Kangsong.”

The intelligence community appears to have even less basis for claiming a secret North Korean nuclear site—much less multiple secret sites—today than it did when the US government charged that North Korea had a secret nuclear facility in mid-1998. That was when the Clinton administration [informed congressional leaders](#) and the South Korean government privately that US intelligence analysts were convinced that a site with tunnels carved into a mountain at Kumchang-ri was intended to house a new reactor and plutonium reprocessing center, based on satellite photographs and other intelligence.

After months of negotiations, the North finally agreed to US on-site inspections in June 1999 and again in May 2000. The result of those two inspections was that the US government was

compelled to [acknowledge](#) that the purpose of the tunnel complex at Kumchang-ri had been to vent fumes from an underground uranium milling plant.

At least the intelligence community had identified a specific site in 1998 that it regarded with suspicion, which is not the case today. Nevertheless, a group of officials is promoting the idea that North Korea is planning to keep such sites secret under a negotiated agreement. The timing of the leaked intelligence assessment that prompted these stories suggested that someone in the Trump administration was seeking to sway the White House to adopt the tougher US stance in Pompeo's trip to Pyongyang in early July. Albright appeared to be referring to that effort when he told the *Post* that intelligence assessment came just when "there's a worry that the Trump administration may go soft, and accept a deal that focuses on Yongbyon and forgets about these other sites."

National security adviser John Bolton had been [reported as pushing for a hard line](#) in diplomatic talks with North Korea that would threaten their viability. These reports raise the obvious possibility that the officials who conveyed the alleged intelligence conclusion were part of a political effort coordinated with him.

Hyping Yongbyon Improvements to Discredit Diplomacy

During the same time period as the reporting on alleged secret sites, *NBC News*, *CNN* and the *Wall Street Journal* all reported on North Korea [making rapid upgrades](#) to its nuclear weapons complex at Yongbyon and [expanding its missile production program](#)—all at the very moment when Trump and Kim were agreeing on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula at their Singapore Summit.

In each case, the reports cited analyses of commercial satellite imagery from independent analysts, including contributors to *38 North*. But they all employed a common device to create a false narrative about the negotiations with North Korea: by misrepresenting the diplomatic context in which the satellite images were collected, they drew political conclusions about North Korean strategy that were unwarranted.

The series of stories involved more than a mere misunderstanding of the raw information being reported. They all denigrated the idea of negotiating with North Korea on the grounds that it cannot be trusted. The *NBC News* and *CNN* stories on improvements at the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center cited the analysis of satellite images [published by 38 North](#) on June 26. And they were all slanted to lead readers to conclude that the improvements in question signified a nefarious intention by North Korea to deceive the Trump administration.

The headline of the June 27 *NBC News* story asked, "If North Korea is denuclearizing, why is it expanding a nuclear research center?" And it warned that North Korea "continues to make improvements to a major nuclear facility, raising questions about President Donald Trump's claim that Kim Jong Un has agreed to disarm, independent experts tell NBC News."

CNN's story about the same images [declared](#) that there were "troubling signs" that North Korea was making "improvements" or "upgrades" at a "rapid pace" to its nuclear facilities, some of which it said were carried out *after* the Trump-Kim summit. It cited one facility that had produced plutonium in the past that had been upgraded, despite Kim's alleged promise to Trump to draw down his nuclear arsenal.

Both the *NBC* and *CBS* stories were misrepresenting the significance of the improvements described in the *38 North* analysis. They either ignored or sought to discredit the carefully-worded caveat in that assessment, which cautioned that the continued work at the Yongbyon facility “should not be seen as having any relationship to North Korea’s pledge to denuclearize.”

The analysis was referring to the fact that the Singapore Summit’s joint statement did not commit North Korea to immediately halt its activities in their nuclear and missile programs and therefore the improvements at Yongbyon had no bearing on whether Pyongyang would agree to denuclearization. Indeed, during the negotiation of US-Soviet and US-Russian arms control agreements, both sides continued to build weapons until the agreement was completed. It should not have come as a surprise, therefore, that work at Yongbyon was continuing.

NBC News deliberately ignored these crucial contextual facts and instead selectively reported statements from other analysts dismissing the notion that North Korea would ever denuclearize and would continue to try to deceive the US about its true intentions.

On July 1, a few days after those stories appeared, the *Wall Street Journal* [headlined](#), “New satellite imagery indicates Pyongyang is pushing ahead with weapons programs even as it pursues dialogue with Washington.” The lead paragraph called it a “major expansion of a key missile-manufacturing plant.”

The images of a North Korean solid-fuel missile manufacturing facility at Hamhung showed that new buildings had been added to the facility beginning in the early spring, after Kim Jong Un had called for more production of solid-fuel rocket engines and warhead tips last August. The exterior construction of some buildings was completed “around the time” of the Trump-Kim summit meeting, according to the analysts at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies. The Center’s David Schmerler told the *Journal*, “The expansion of production infrastructure for North Korea’s solid missile infrastructure probably suggests that Kim Jong Un does not intend to abandon his nuclear and missile programs.”

The improvements in North Korea’s infrastructure for missile parts manufacturing documented by the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, which [began well before the summit](#), are hardly evidence against North Korea’s willingness to negotiate a comprehensive agreement with the United States. Like any country dealing with a serious military threat from an adversary, North Korea is both hedging against the real possibility of talks failing and signaling that it is not unilaterally surrendering. The United States is doing the same thing, albeit in different ways.

Conclusion

Major media reporting on what is alleged to be intelligence and photographic evidence that North Korea intends to deceive the United States in negotiations on denuclearization has been extraordinarily misleading. It has blithely ignored serious issues surrounding the alleged intelligence conclusions and suggested that North Korea has demonstrated bad faith by failing to halt all nuclear and missile-related activities.

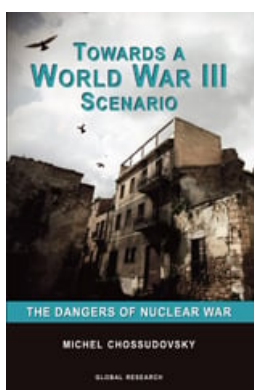
Recent stories do not reflect actual evidence of covert facilities, but rather deep suspicions of North Korean intentions within the intelligence community that have been fed to the

media by individuals within the administration who are unhappy with the direction of the president's North Korea policy following the Singapore Summit. And breathless reports on improvements in North Korean nuclear and missile facilities ignore the distinction between a summit statement and a final deal with North Korea. They have thus obscured the reality that the fate of the negotiations depends not only North Korean policy but on the willingness of the United States to make changes in its policy toward the DPRK and the Korean Peninsula that past administrations have all been reluctant to make.

These stories also underscore a broader problem with media coverage of the US-North Korean negotiations: a strong underlying bias toward the view that it is futile to negotiate with North Korea. The latest stories have constructed a dark narrative of North Korean deception that is not based on verified facts. If this narrative is not rebutted or corrected, it could shift public opinion—which has been [overwhelmingly favorable to negotiations](#) with North Korea—against such a policy.

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[“Towards a World War III Scenario: The Dangers of Nuclear War”](#)

by Michel Chossudovsky

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Reviews

“This book is a ‘must’ resource – a richly documented and systematic diagnosis of the supremely pathological geo-strategic planning of US wars since ‘9-11’ against non-nuclear countries to seize their oil fields and resources under cover of ‘freedom and democracy’.”

-John McMurtry, Professor of Philosophy, Guelph University

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Michel Chossudovsky exposes the insanity of our privatized war machine. Iran is being targeted with nuclear weapons as part of a war agenda built on distortions and lies for the purpose of private profit. The real aims are oil, financial hegemony and global control. The price could be nuclear holocaust. When weapons become the hottest export of the world’s only superpower, and diplomats work as salesmen for the defense industry, the whole world is recklessly endangered. If we must have a military, it belongs entirely in the public sector. No one should profit from mass death and destruction.

-Ellen Brown, author of ‘Web of Debt’ and president of the Public Banking Institute



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