

## Kim Jong Un's Warning to Trump

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**North Korea's leader is telling Washington that his patience is wearing out. But his New Year's Day speech contained other fascinating clues to Kim's ambitions for 2019—and beyond.**



AFP/Getty Images

Kim Jong Un had a simple message for U.S. President Donald J. Trump during [his New Year's Day address](#). Echoing months of statements carried in North Korean state media since the June 12, 2018, summit meeting between the two leaders in Singapore, Kim noted that he had followed through in good faith on measures to signal his interest in seeing through “complete denuclearization” on the Korean Peninsula. In two words, Kim’s message for the United States: “Your turn.”

It’s a message Kim has been repeating [since June 13](#), when the North Korean leader was paraphrased in his state media as vowing that “if the U.S. side takes genuine measures for building trust in order to improve the DPRK-U.S. relationship,” North Korea would offer up further concessions. In Kim’s view, he had offered up ample concessions in 2018 to merit concessions from the Trump administration, which remains fixated on offering North Korea sanctions relief and other inducements only *after* the final, fully verified denuclearization of North Korea is attained.

In 2017 and 2018, Kim had a habit of telling us what he was going to do in the year ahead and then proceed to do it. While North Korea is often painted as an opaque state, impossible to predict, the truth is that Kim has been remarkably transparent about his intentions. On defense and nuclear matters, at least, North Korean policy has remained static through his tenure.

In 2017, for instance, Kim promised that North Korea would acquire a capability to strike the U.S. mainland that year. By November, he showed that he had successfully overseen that project, with two intercontinental-range ballistic missile designs having been flight-tested successfully. Similarly, in 2018, Kim ordered the mass production of ballistic missiles and nuclear warheads. Per multiple reports last year citing U.S. intelligence assessments, that's happened, too—even as Kim jetted off to foreign capitals, shedding his reputation as a hermit king.

Kim recounted this history in his speech, underlining North Korea's internal and external promises to behave responsibly as a nuclear weapons-possessing state. He noted that North Korea had “declared ... that we would neither make and test nuclear weapons any longer nor use and proliferate them, and we have taken various practical measures [in this regard].”

This line may sound new and significant, but it isn't. It reiterates directives dating back at least to North Korea's [March 2013 adoption of nuclear-state status](#). In that declaration, the Kim regime pledged to handle nuclear materials securely, not proliferate them, and to only use nuclear weapons in circumstances where it perceived its national security and survival to be threatened. (North Korea has been promising not to proliferate its nukes for years before Kim Jong Un.)

Kim's “your turn” message for Trump this year shouldn't have surprised anyone paying attention. It was, after all, during the September 2018 summit between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in that the North Korean leader signed his name onto a statement that suggested he might be open to the prospect of further disarmament gestures should the United States deliver “corresponding measures.” During the North Korean foreign minister's address to the United Nations General Assembly in New York that same month, it became clear that the primary North Korean demand—as had been true for years—was the removal of international sanctions.

In April 2018, Kim had announced a unilateral suspension of nuclear tests and tests of the kinds of missiles that could strike the U.S. homeland. The gesture was at the time justified on the basis of technical parameters: Kim suggested that North Korea had sufficient testing data, had completed its deterrent force qualitatively, and could now cease testing. In subsequent weeks, however, those measures came to be described as “denuclearization steps” by North Korea. Kim was framing the mere cessation of testing as a significant concession on the pathway to the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.”

That phrase received particular attention in Kim's New Year's address, too. In December, a remarkable commentary in the state-run Korean Central News Agency [attributed to the pen name Jong Hyon](#) defined that phrase—and its geographic contours—in stark detail. “When we refer to the Korean Peninsula, they include both the area of the DPRK and the area of South Korea where aggression troops including the nuclear weapons of the U.S. are deployed,” the commentary noted, revealing North Korea's continuing conspiratorial belief that U.S. tactical nuclear weapons that were removed from the Peninsula in 1991 remain there.

“When we refer to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, it, therefore, means removing all elements of nuclear threats from the areas of both the north and the south of Korea and also from surrounding areas from where the Korean peninsula is targeted. This should be clearly understood,” the commentary added.

Kim Jong Un emphasized this same message, though less explicitly. He noted that U.S. “strategic assets”—a North Korea phrase used to mean everything from ballistic missile defense capabilities like THAAD to nuclear attack submarines and aircraft carriers—“should no longer be permitted” on or around the Korean Peninsula.

It's here too that Kim seized on the tremendous progress North Korea made in 2018 to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington. Pointing to the success in the implementation of the September 19 inter-Korean Comprehensive Military Agreement, which saw a range of tension reduction measures on land, at sea and in the air, Kim said South Korea should cease “joint military exercises with foreign forces.” The allies have already announced that the upcoming 2019 iterations of Foal Eagle and Key Resolve—the large springtime exercises—will be modified to allow diplomacy to proceed with North Korea. But separately, Kim's speech, which was broadcast live for the first time in South Korea, comes amid great discord between Seoul and Washington on the finalization of an agreement to govern burden-sharing within the alliance.

Going further, Kim encouraged his counterpart in the South to push ahead with inter-Korean projects without waiting for support from the United States—effectively an invitation to Moon to recognize the historic moment and push forward in the spirit of Korean self-determination, even if that meant violating international sanctions. Kim dangled specifically the prospect of resuming the operations of the Kaesong Industrial Park and tourism activities at Mt. Kumgang—two banner projects of the “Sunshine” era of inter-Korean rapprochement in the early 2000s, during the rule of his father, Kim Jong Il.

Zeroing in on what Kim said about the United States misses the broader significance of his speech. Although Kim spent about a quarter of his speech addressing inter-Korean issues and diplomacy with the United States — generating most of the headlines — it was primarily about internal affairs.

That other three-quarters reveals North Korean priorities in the year ahead. Namely, the “new strategic line” announced by Kim last year in April as a successor

to [the \*byungjin\* line](#), which sought the parallel attainment of a nuclear deterrent and economic prosperity, is here to stay. This strategic line remains without a name or a slogan for now, but North Korea's core drive now is attaining economic self-sufficiency and prosperity—an updated version of its foundational ideology of *juche*.

It's clear from his speech that Kim hopes to see through North Korea's economic development regardless of changes in the external environment. He emphasizes the importance of industrial capacity-building, improvements in management techniques for facilities, attaining energy self-sufficiency and modernizing North Korea's military. Last year, despite Kim's relatively heavy travel schedule, he conducted multiple "on-the-spot guidance" visits to a range of North Korean industrial, health care and commercial facilities to direct this project of economic improvement. While Kim himself and his father and grandfather all have conducted these kinds of visits, his tours in 2018 were notable for the push toward modernization and development.

Kim also signaled that he recognizes that the United States won't be lifting its sanctions anytime soon. As a result, North Korea intends to hedge by shifting away from its reliance on exporting coal—a sanctioned activity—to using it domestically. Kim additionally referenced "atomic power" in his speech, perhaps suggesting that 2019 may see a new push by North Korea to finalize and announce the operation of a new facility thought to be an experimental light-water reactor at its Yongbyon nuclear complex.

Kim did leave one warning on the table that should be taken seriously by Trump and his national security team. He warned the United States not to insist on his unilateral capitulation as it has been and, in the process, test North Korea's "patience." If it does, Pyongyang may "be compelled to find a new way for defending the sovereignty of the country and the supreme interests of the state and for achieving peace and stability of the Korean peninsula." Kim conveyed again his willingness to meet Trump—and only Trump—but he also made clear that a second summit will have to open a door to the concessions that North Korea seeks from the United States.

What exactly Kim wants is left ambiguous, but even Trump—who has repeatedly tweeted about how much he appreciates the cessation of nuclear and missile testing—can guess what might lie on the other side. At some point in 2019, if the "corresponding measures" North Korea has been seeking from the United States fail to arrive, Kim will likely turn back to his old ways. The missiles will begin flying again as North Korea showcases the fruits of its qualitative and quantitative attainment in 2017 and 2018. A [North Korean statement in the final days of 2018 alluded to this](#), suggesting that the U.S. State Department was "bent on bringing DPRK-U.S. relations back to the status of last year, which was marked by exchanges of fire." Given progress on the inter-Korean front in the meantime, Kim may be betting that South Koreans supportive of Moon's inter-Korean peace push will be eager to blame the collapse of diplomacy on the United States, dealing a blow to the already-troubled U.S.-South Korea alliance in the process.

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