



POLICY BRIEF NO. 65 | AUGUST 19, 2020

# What the Bolton Memoir Tells Us about the Future of North Korean Nuclear Negotiations

By Van Jackson

## INTRODUCTION

Washington memoirs can be deeply insightful if you know how to read them. Even ego-inflating, self-serving, or misinformed interpretations of history are capable of educating and informing—so long as you can maintain perspective and situate the author’s tale in relation to what you know from other sources.

In this sense, Ambassador John Bolton’s memoir, *The Room Where It Happened*, offers something counterintuitively useful to those who wish for progress in nuclear negotiations with North Korea. As Trump’s national security adviser, Bolton not only witnessed and played a role in the most high-profile diplomatic gambits ever wagered between the United States and

North Korea—he confesses with self-satisfaction that he helped sabotage them.

What follows is an attempt to mine Bolton’s rendition of US North Korea policy, and especially his take on summit diplomacy in 2018 and 2019, for lessons that might actually improve the prospects of future nuclear negotiations. It identifies and corrects a number of “Boltonisms”—that is, problematic beliefs or assumptions about North Korean nuclear diplomacy that acted as barriers to improved relations and threat reduction.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## **BOLTONISM 1: PRESSURE IS THE BEST DENUCLEARIZATION POLICY**

Bolton has always maintained that the United States cannot live with a nuclear North Korea and that confrontation is the only way to prevent co-existence. In his memoir, he describes two risks that are so unacceptable that the United States must coerce North Korea into nuclear reversal. One is the risk of “nuclear blackmail”—that North Korea would threaten to attack Japan, South Korea, or the United States with nuclear weapons if its demands about any particular issue are not met. The second is that North Korea will “sell anything to anybody with hard cash,” which means North Korea’s “mere possession” of nuclear weapons will lead to more nuclear proliferation.

The nuclear blackmail risk is much lower, and much less of a problem, than Bolton believes. Threats of nuclear attack are disproportionate to the potential gains in any blackmail scenario. More importantly, the United States enjoys substantial nuclear superiority over Pyongyang, making it futile for North Korea to go down the path of nuclear coercion unless doing so in self-defense. If North Korea is rational, and Kim Jong Un’s diplomatic strategies have proven that it is, then there is no credible risk of nuclear blackmail.

Bolton’s worry about the second risk necessitating confrontation—proliferation—is based on equally flawed reasoning. Desperate circumstances yield desperate actions. North Korea sells weapons for foreign currency *because* it is under a stringent regime of economic sanctions. If your concern is North Korea proliferating illicit materials to other countries, then do not isolate it from foreign capital and aid. Yet the premise of the US “maximum pressure” campaign—of which sanctions are the main component—does the opposite. Given that North Korea has historically responded to pressure with pressure in kind, not with capitulation,<sup>1</sup> it is unrealistic to expect a pressure-based strategy to result in

nuclear reductions much less denuclearization. In short, pressure eliminates North Korean incentives to avoid the risks about which Bolton most worries.

## **BOLTONISM 2: TIME IS ON NORTH KOREA’S SIDE**

Bolton repeatedly stressed that time was always on North Korea’s side—“delay worked in North Korea’s favor, as it usually did for proliferators.” In Bolton’s view, time is a liability because it is a necessary ingredient for North Korea to improve the quantity and quality of its nuclear weapons capabilities. But time is inherently value neutral. A prolonged timeline would be an asset rather than a liability if North Korea was engaged in productive relations with South Korea and the United States because it would likely moderate North Korean foreign policy in the interim.

Bolton, however, weaponized the belief that time is on North Korea’s side to argue for the “Libya model” of full denuclearization in the span of less than a year. The demand for such rapid denuclearization was a poison pill for diplomacy. Absent trust, a small nation will never relinquish to a much larger adversary weapons that ensure their survival. Over a long enough horizon, trust can accrue sufficient to change the small nation’s calculation, by changing the adversarial relationship. But requiring disarmament quickly leaves no time for trust, and therefore no possibility of denuclearization.

## **BOLTONISM 3: ACTION FOR ACTION BENEFITS NORTH KOREA**

According to Bolton, “Action for action’...inevitably worked to benefit North Korea (or any proliferator) by front-loading economic benefits to the North but dragging out dismantling the nuclear program into the indefinite future.” In other words, incremental progress on the basis of reciprocity is a net negative for the United States because it would

<sup>1</sup> Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

never realize the fullest ambition of total denuclearization. Even after Trump rejected the Libya model for denuclearization, Bolton used this prejudice against action-for-action to justify demanding elimination of North Korea's nuclear warheads at the Hanoi summit in February 2019, whereas other advisers were suggesting only to seek the elimination of North Korea's intercontinental ballistic missiles.

There are at least two problems with this way of thinking. First, US threat perceptions of North Korea are not binary. Some reduction in North Korea's nuclear weapons capabilities reduces the threat more than—and is therefore preferable to—no reduction. So while denuclearization may be the optimum goal, it cannot and should not be the only goal. Second, in the context of frigid rivalry, a tit-for-tat approach to negotiations with North Korea is inherently fragile, requiring so many calibrated steps amid foreign policy hawks in both Washington and Pyongyang (and sometimes Seoul) who have often worked to delay and thwart past nuclear agreements.<sup>2</sup> For this reason, transactionalism—that is, treating North's sacrifice of nuclear weapons as an exchange—is not a realistic way of realizing an enemy's disarmament.

But the choice of action-for-action versus a “grand bargain” is a false one. Action-for-action can be an effective strategy among non-rivals. The crucial task is to situate a process of action-for-action only after initiating a process of rivalry reversal. It goes against everything Bolton stands for, but many modes of research have shown that the stronger party in a rivalry must make substantial unilateral gestures before expecting reciprocity to deliver results.<sup>3</sup> In the

context of North Korean relations with the United States, this means the United States needs a strategy of rivalry termination. Without it, there is no realistic strategy of denuclearization.

#### **BOLTONISM 4: NORTH KOREA HAS NO MODERATES**

Bolton believes North Korea has no moderates to which the United States might appeal, describing “...one of the oldest games in the Communist playbook: frightening gullible Westerners with tales of splits between ‘moderates’ and ‘hardliners’ so that we accepted otherwise unpalatable outcomes to bolster the ‘moderates.’” This is why Bolton believes concessions are “dangerous.” If a regime consists of only hardliners, then appeasement will make them more aggressive. This was the lesson that America's Cold Warriors overlearned from the mistake of the British appeasing Hitler at Munich in 1938 by granting Nazi Germany the Sudetenland.

North Korea's political system and foreign policy may be distinctly militarist, but every political regime consists of a mix of moderates and hardliners—even in North Korea. Studies of North Korean institutions, for example, confirm that Foreign Ministry elites consistently express more dovish foreign policy preferences than the North Korean People's Army (KPA).<sup>4</sup> We also know from firsthand encounters that there are bureaucratic turf battles between North Korea's military and its diplomats.<sup>5</sup> But even if you believe that Kim Jong Un probably does not have moderates in his midst, given the high stakes in any North Korea policy decision, it is worth probing to validate the belief. Moreover,

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<sup>2</sup> Van Jackson, “Threat Consensus and Rapprochement Failure: Revisiting the Collapse of US-North Korea Relations, 1994-2002,” *Foreign Policy analysis* Vol. 14, no.2 (2018), pp. 235-53.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Van Jackson, *Risk Realism: The Arms Control Endgame for North Korea Policy* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2019); Tony Armstrong, *Breaking the Ice: Rapprochement between East and West Germany, the United States and China, and Israel and Egypt* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-Totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> When former Secretary of Defense William Perry visited North Korea, for example, a hostile KPA officer berated an official from the Foreign Ministry who was present by condescending “You don't have to pay any attention to these ‘neckties.’ They don't know anything about military matters!” As quoted in William Perry, *My Journey at the Nuclear Brink* (Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, 2015), p. 164.

external circumstances can affect the relative strength of internal advocacy for particular policies. US policy could indirectly influence the popularity or persuasiveness of dovish, restrained policies within the North Korean system.

### **BOLTONISM 5: NEGOTIATIONS WILL DRIVE A WEDGE BETWEEN SOUTH KOREA AND THE US**

In preparations for the first Trump-Kim summit, Bolton “told Trump that we needed the closest possible coordination with Moon Jae-in to avoid North Korea’s engineering a split between Washington and Seoul. I wanted to preserve US–South Korean alignment.” This is a classic worry in Washington. For most Beltway insiders, US alliances with South Korea and Japan are articles of faith. No rational American policymaker wants to deal with North Korea in a manner that will strain its alliances if avoidable.

Under previous conservative South Korean presidents, fear of a wedge between allies while negotiating with North Korea was understandable and difficult to avoid. But that is what makes the current moment so remarkable. With a progressive president occupying the Blue House, and a majority in the National Assembly from the same party as the president, the risk of an intra-alliance wedge arises not from negotiating with North Korea but rather from failing to. President Moon has tied himself to a Korean peace initiative that only benefits from US efforts to reach a credible deal with North Korea. Sanctions relief, banning nuclear-capable bomber deployments, exercise suspensions, a declaration ending the Korean War—all things that would raise fears of abandonment in a conservative South Korean presidency. With the Blue House and National Assembly leaning progressive though, the Korean Peninsula has a unique opportunity to improve relations and

stability with North Korea without coming at the expense of the alliance.

### **BOLTONISM 6: ENDING THE KOREAN WAR IS A DANGEROUS CONCESSION**

At multiple points in the book, Bolton mentions that declaring an end to the Korean War would harm US interests: “I stressed my view that neither sanctions relief nor an ‘end of the Korea War’ declaration should come until complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization was concluded...” He says he first feared this would happen during President Obama’s tenure, referring to it as a “dangerous concession.” He subsequently worried North Korea would manipulate Trump into such a declaration. Indeed, Special Envoy for North Korea Policy Steve Biegun gave a speech at Stanford University on January 31, 2019, just before the second Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi, that primed the public for an end-of-war declaration. Biegun asserted that the Trump administration was preparing to pursue a peace regime in Korea “simultaneously and in parallel” with denuclearization, which amounted to a large change in stated policy if not in its execution.<sup>6</sup>

To prevent this, Bolton plotted with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo about “what to extract from North Korea in return for an ‘end of war’ communique, including perhaps a baseline declaration of their nuclear-weapons and ballistic-missile programs.” Bolton said he “doubted the North would agree, or agree on any of our other ideas, but it might at least prevent a gratuitous US concession ‘ending’ the Korean War.” Because Bolton thinks North Korea’s leadership is hardliners all the way down, concessions equal appeasement, implying that agreeing to end the Korean War will somehow spur North Korean aggression.

It is true that ending the Korean War ends a historical rationale for US troop presence in South Korea. And America’s ability to deter

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Biegun, Remarks on the DPRK, Stanford University (January 31, 2019), [https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/transcript\\_stephen\\_bieugn\\_discussion\\_on\\_the\\_dpr\\_k\\_20190131.pdf](https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/transcript_stephen_bieugn_discussion_on_the_dpr_k_20190131.pdf).

North Korean aggression may be put at risk if US forces are not on the Peninsula. But US troop presence in Korea should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. The ultimate success of deterrence comes from eliminating the conditions that gave rise to its need in the first place. If there is an alternative rationale for an enduring US presence in Korea—including deterrence—it should stand on its own merit, not be conflated with an unresolved historical legacy. What is more, America’s future military footprint in Korea is a question that is part of a peace regime process, to be determined over time and consultation rather than upon a declaration. Ending the Korean War, if done as part of a larger sequence of moves—which would include forsaking the

goal of denuclearization in favor of arm control and some form of sanctions relief<sup>7</sup>—is a step toward undoing the rivalry that makes a North Korean attack possible in the first place. Bolton uses his memoir to try and convince the reader, among other things, of his deeply cynical and selective view of North Korea—a view that necessitates the kinds of US policies that have made the Korean Peninsula less secure for decades. But amid the gossip and fear-mongering, Bolton helps the reader construct the mental map of a foreign policy hawk who actively sabotaged negotiations with North Korea. Now that we have the map to his mind, we stand a better chance of reverse engineering the ongoing failures that resulted from it.

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<sup>7</sup> The role that ending the Korean War would play in reversing rivalry with North Korea is outlined in Jackson, *Risk Realism*.

The Asia Pacific Leadership Network for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (APLN) is an advocacy group that aims to inform and energize public opinion, especially high-level policymakers, to take seriously the very real threat posed by nuclear weapons, and to do everything possible to achieve a world in which they are contained, diminished and eventually eliminated.

