

UPF USA: Panelists Evaluate North Korea's Increasingly Aggressive Posture

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Washington, D.C., United States – North Korean President Kim Jong Un has signaled a radical departure from his government's former position of seeking eventual reunification with the South. He now says he wants no more discussion and that South Korea is the North's greatest enemy. A group of experts discussed the implications of this stance in the monthly Washington Brief webcast, co-sponsored by The Washington Times Foundation and UPF-USA, on March 5, 2024.

Specifically, they considered the question "Is Kim Jong Un Preparing for War?"

This episode featured guest panelist **Mr. Robert Manning**, respected North Korea and China analyst and distinguished fellow with the Global Foresight Hub of the Stimson Center in Washington, D.C. Regular panelists included former six-party talks envoy **Amb. Joseph DeTrani** as moderator, along with Georgetown University security studies professor **Dr. Alexandre Mansourov**. **Dr. Michael Jenkins** opened the program as the host for the sponsoring organization.

Analysts have always assumed that President Kim would never pull the trigger on an all-out war because he knows his country would not survive. But the panel considered that North Korea's perceptions could be completely different from those of the U.S.-Korea-Japan alliance. Perhaps the North perceives the U.S. leadership to be weaker than ever before, and that the time to strike is now. The current U.S. administration's efforts to revive denuclearization talks with the North have gone nowhere.

Mr. Manning said that if U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump is re-elected to the White House later this year, it could deliver a spark to the moribund relationship between Washington and Pyongyang, though he stressed it's unclear whether such a course would lead to the best long-term policy outcome.

"I think, in a sense, [Kim](#) may be waiting for Trump," Mr. Manning said. "Trump considers himself a dealmaker above all...I think he would be tempted to try again."

During his presidency, Mr. Trump held three meetings with Mr. [Kim](#) in hopes of securing a deal to end Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program in exchange for the kinds of economic sanctions relief and international investments that Mr. Trump said would transform North Korean society. But the two men failed to reach an agreement.

Mr. Manning said he would not expect an agreement on total nuclear disarmament, "because [Kim](#) has taken that off the table with everything he's done, but an attempt to try a nuclear freeze or something like that, which in theory is not a bad idea." He added that the lack of transparency around [North Korea's](#) nuclear program would make any type of "freeze" difficult to verify, however.

The situation on the divided, heavily armed Korean Peninsula has grown more dangerous in recent years. Pyongyang routinely conducts missile tests and seeks to diversify its platforms of weapons of mass destruction beyond its ground-based missile units.

To break the impasse, Mr. Manning suggested one possible approach is for the United States and the international community to offer to "legitimize" [North Korea's](#) nuclear program. "In other words, they want to be like Israel, Pakistan," said Mr. Manning, referring to nations known to possess nuclear weapons. "If [Kim](#) could get that and get sanctions dropped, I think he would be tempted."

Former U.S. Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper said recently that the best U.S. course of action might be to withdraw demands for "denuclearization" and instead recognize that [North Korea](#) is a nuclear-capable state. "I become an advocate for recognizing reality and acknowledging, officially, they have nuclear capabilities," he said during The Washington Brief forum last month. "Doing so doesn't raise or lower the intrinsic threat that they pose one bit and plays to their need for 'face,' for respect, and maybe puts them in a better mood to negotiate."

Former CIA official Mr. Joseph DeTrani said the door may still be cracked open, albeit slightly, to a normalization accord between the United States and [North Korea](#). Still, he said, Mr. [Kim's](#) recent embrace of Russian President Vladimir Putin and support for Mr. Putin's war in Ukraine have greatly complicated the situation.

Mr. [Kim](#) has deepened his strategic ties with Russia over the past two years. [North Korea](#) has provided Moscow with arms and ammunition for the Ukraine campaign in violation of international sanctions. Many suspect the Kremlin is offering Mr. Kim access to more sophisticated Russian weaponry and to Russian markets in exchange for his support.

"I think there's still that prospect there that [Kim Jong Un](#) has not walked away from a normal relationship with the United States and the international community. Unfortunately, now he's embraced Vladimir Putin," said Mr. DeTrani. "That has made it very, very difficult for [North Korea](#) to sort of pivot back to a more normal relationship with the international community, the United States," he said. "However, I think that's still there. I don't think we should walk away from that."

[North Korea's](#) string of recent missile tests and embrace of Mr. Putin, along with Mr. [Kim's](#) increasingly hostile rhetoric toward South Korea, have left specialists openly wondering whether the Korean Peninsula faces its most dangerous moment since the Korean War of the 1950s.

However, the consensus of the panelists was that war isn't imminent. If Mr. [Kim](#) were planning to launch a military offensive against South Korea, it's unlikely he would be shipping major quantities of arms to Russia for use in Ukraine.

"The types of indicators we would expect to see on the eve of a North Korean attack, simply, we have not observed them," said Alexandre Mansourov, professor at Georgetown University's [Center](#) for Security Studies.