

## Secret Inter-Korean Nuke Cooperation Rumors Officially Blasted

Uproar underscores trust gulf dividing South Korea's right and left regarding North Korea policy

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Asia-Pacific Research, February 04, 2021

[Asia Times](#) 3 February 2021

Region: [East Asia](#)

Theme: [Media](#)

South Korean **Unification Minister Lee In-young** did not mince words when addressing explosive allegations that surfaced last week, alleging that South Korean **President Moon Jae-in** and North Korean leader **Kim Jong Un** had secretly discussed an inter-Korean nuclear power project.

"I think that the commentary coming from right-wing media is a baseless argument," Unification Minister Lee In-young told foreign reporters in Seoul on Wednesday. "The Ministry of Unification is in charge of inter-Korea cooperation and we have never had a discussion on building a nuclear power plant for them.

"You won't be able to find the 'n' [nuclear] word' in the new economic initiative we presented to North Korea."

That was a reference to plans for inter-Korean economic cooperation, handed over on a USB from Moon to Kim, in the heady days of 2018.

Then, following North Korea's surprise, last-minute participation in the Winter Olympic Games in South Korea, the formerly reticent Kim emerged from his isolation. Summits took place between the two Korean leaders in April and September, in addition to a historic summit between Kim and then-US President Donald Trump.

But questions have long hovered over exactly what was discussed between Kim and Moon during their first summit in Panmunjom, the truce village in the DMZ, in April 2018. There, the two leaders took time away from their aides for a 30-minute *tete a tete* on a bridge.

While the meeting was filmed, it took place just beyond the hearing range of fascinated observers.

### North versus South - right vs left

While the wider world focuses on the potentially deadly tensions simmering between North Korea and South Korea, a lower profile domestic struggle is underway in the South over policy toward the North.

Right-wingers are deeply suspicious of what they consider a dangerous enemy state, while left-wingers seek better relations with their benighted northern brethren.

A case in point is the furious argument that has been underway in South Korea since late last week, after conservative media alleged that Moon and Kim had reached some kind of secret agreement for South Korea to offer nuclear power to the North.

Reports stated that the parliamentary Board of Audit and Inspection, and state prosecutors – who are now battling determined efforts by the Moon administration to reform the prosecution – had discovered evidence that official files, dated to just after 2018's first inter-Korean summit, dealing with a joint nuclear power project, had been deleted by officials.

The presidential Blue House shot back. On Monday, Moon warned the opposition “not to use outdated politics to incite confrontation.”

That was a reference to Cold War rhetoric. Still, more fuel was added to the fire on the same day when the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation, or MOLIT, released a six-page document outlining a plan for a trio of advanced South Korean nuclear plants to supply energy to the North.

One is on South Korea's east coast, with a power line heading north, and one is sited in the DMZ between the Koreas, while another is on North Korea's east coast.

The MOLIT said the documents were simply part of an internal ministry study for potential inter-Korean energy cooperation. Indeed, common sense argues that the plans are highly provisional. Any construction of nuclear reactors in the DMZ or North Korea is impossible at present, and could not escape the eye of the global community if it proceeded.

Still, the conservative opposition People's Power Party is scathing.

“Documents destroyed by officials of the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy include documents that considered support for nuclear power plan[s] for North Korea immediately after the 2018 inter-Korean summit,” the party said in a communique sent to foreign reporters on Wednesday.

### **Investigation demanded**

The PPP lambasted the Moon administration – which opposes South Korea's own nuclear power network – and demanded a probe.

“The ruling party should take the lead in demanding inspection of [the] administration and announcing the truth to the people,” the PPP said. It also called for the disclosure of the USB's contents.

This bitterness is light years away from 2018, when hopes for a breakthrough on the long-divided peninsula were running high.

Then, the Moon administration made no secret of its enthusiasm to reopen shuttered economic and tourism enclaves in the North, and reconnect inter-Korean railway lines – an initiative that would have granted South Korea direct access to the Eurasian continent for

the first time since Seoul's troops briefly reached the China border during Korean War combat in 1950.

But 2018's high hopes evaporated after Trump "walked" from his second summit with Kim in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2019. Many had expected a "small deal" to eventuate, under which the North Koreans gave up certain facilities in return for certain sanctions waivers.

Instead, the US sought a "big deal" - the dismantlement of all North Korean nuclear facilities.

The summit ended early, leading to a re-freeze in relations between Pyongyang and Washington. And with Washington being Seoul's major (and only) ally, Seoul, inevitably found its relations with Pyongyang back in the cold.

In Spring 2022, Moon exits the presidency. While his advisers hope the Joe Biden administration will be accommodating toward North Korea, it is now conducting a policy review that may take months. That leaves Moon precious little time to forge a solid inter-Korean legacy before leaving office.

Presently, Moon's hands are tightly bound when it comes to engaging North Korea.

The realities of global sanctions and the centrality of the US alliance have halted cross-border relations. Moreover, due to Covid-19, North Korea has sealed its borders. As a result, there is no travel, commerce or physical cooperation underway between the Koreas.

### **A tsunami in a tea cup**

Meanwhile, in Seoul, the left accuses the right of seeking to raise incendiary issues ahead of by-elections in April, when, among other seats, Seoul's mayorship will be contested. More broadly, the spat highlights the lack of consensus that exists within South Korea over North Korea - notably the crevasse gaping between right and left.

Predominantly elderly hard-right activists, who until the pandemic struck had been rallying in their thousands in central Seoul almost every weekend and many of who like to dress in fatigues and who lived through deadly inter-Korean hostilities of the 1950s, '60s, '70s and '80s, consider Moon a traitor.

But even younger and milder conservatives, the country's three major newspapers and some Korea watchers in the US fret that Moon is too keen to get bromantic with Kim.

One independent watcher sees the current issue as a tsunami in a tea cup.

"I don't think just preparing a road map to assist North Korea with nuclear energy is sensitive," said Go Myong-hyun a North Korea watcher at think tank the Asan Institute. "There is the precedent of KEDO."

KEDO, or Korean Energy Development Organization, was a 1994 initiative under which the international community agreed to build light-water nuclear power reactors in North Korea.

In exchange, Pyongyang agreed to freeze its existing atomic facilities. Construction started, but in 2006 was halted with facilities only 30% complete, and with bitter recriminations on

both sides that neither had lived up to their commitments.

The KEDO site is at Sinpo-ri, on North Korea's east coast. That is also where the MOLIT documents suggest the South Korean-built reactor be built, indicating that any future atomic energy plant could be built on, near or over the derelict KEDO site.

Still, there is the question of whether MOLIT or the Blue House kicked off the proposal.

"There is the question of whether the Blue House is behind this or whether MOLIT came up with it by themselves," Go said. "The opposition suspects that this government was too gung ho about inter-Korean econ relations, that is why they are looking for a smoking gun."

Absent that, Go considers the matter "a non-story."

Another observer suggests the uproar has little to do with political stances.

"This is very much a case of the right-wing media putting the boot in - I don't think it points at ideology," said David Tizzard, a British academic at Seoul's Women's University. "Though it may hint at hypocrisy. Moon's justice minister was tarred with corruption, and now he seems to want to denuclearize South Korea, but not North Korea."

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