



## **The Trump-Kim Summit: What's Next?**

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### **Executive Summary**

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\* As has long been the case for the regional states - China, Russia, North Korea, South Korea and Japan - there are two key major grand-strategic objectives for the energy-transportation system of the BRI and the forthcoming exports of rare earths - namely, to further consolidate the Eurasian sphere and to harness Western Europe. Europe is uniquely susceptible to any Russian-Chinese courting on account of a Eurasian sphere in the aftermath of the disastrous G7 summit in Canada.

\* Both Russian and Chinese intelligence have long realized that both South Korea and Japan not only "can live" with a nuclear North Korea - they prefer it to a North Korea amassing conventional forces and threatening widespread destruction as a deterrence of a US regime change. Hence, everybody is ready to placate Kim Jong-Un on the issues of nuclear weapons and ICBMs - that is, everybody except for Trump.

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## Analysis

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The 12 June 2018 Singapore Summit between US President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-Un of the DPRK is over. The hype calmed down, and the unrealistic expectations for magic changes in Pyongyang have all but evaporated.

Meanwhile, the key regional powers - China and Russia - are back integrating North Korea, South Korea, and to a lesser extent Japan, into the regional-global geo-economic system that China is leading in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>1</sup> The declared specter of a North Korean denuclearization remains - but nobody takes it seriously. It is the legitimization of the Kim Dynasty's rule in Pyongyang, as attained in Singapore, that provided the important boost for the China-driven and -led campaign to remake the Far East, and ultimately the entire Eurasia - a process that can now be expedited through the integration of the once delegitimized and isolated North Korea.

In retrospect, the most important outcome of the Singapore summit is that Kim Jong-Un personally heard from President Trump what the US can offer the DPRK, and what is the US attitude toward the DPRK, the RoK, the PRC and the entire region. North Korean senior officials told friendly interlocutors (from China, Russia, Iran, etc.) that the meeting with Trump constituted an affirmation of the warnings Kim Jong-Un had received from Chinese President Xi Jinping in person and from Russian President Vladimir Putin via Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

For all intent and purpose, North Korean denuclearization, if ever, is contingent upon Pyongyang's trust in Washington. This might work with Trump - but who knows what will happen after 2020. And the US accepts that comprehensive denuclearization might take 10-15 years to complete. Little wonder that Pyongyang is focusing on the Qadhafi precedent - which was raised by NSC John Bolton in the Kim Jong-Un context - as a lightning rod. As official Beijing warned Pyongyang, Bush Jr might have been sincere in his agreement with Qadhafi but his successor Obama exploited Qadhafi's weakness to topple the regime and assassinate him. This will not happen to any of the Kims.

Indeed, Kim Jong-Un has never taken the prospects of denuclearization seriously. It has always been a ploy to ensnare Trump's Washington in a political dynamic that would reduce the threat of a US-led war and regime change. North Korean senior officials acknowledged this to friendly interlocutors. As well, internal North Korean documents leave no doubt about Pyongyang's strong conviction regarding the lingering US threats and the US hostile true intentions.

The dramatic decision on a profound rapprochement between South and North Korea, and, ultimately, the possibility of a breakthrough with the US were decided upon in two series of meetings at the beginning and the end of the PyeongChang 2018 Olympic Games (that took place between 9 February and 25 February 2018). Kim Jong-Un sent his sister and confidant Kim Yo-Jong to the opening of PyeongChang Olympic Games so that she can get first hand impression of the sincerity and commitment of South Korean President Moon Jae-In (a key player in the incomplete 2007 initiative at a rapprochement). Moon assured Kim Yo-Jong that it would be possible to strike a deal with Trump, as distinct from official Washington, even though US Vice-President Mike Pence (then in PyeongChang) refused to meet with her. Kim Jong-Un was sufficiently encouraged and reassured to send Kim Yong-Chol (officially Vice Chairman of the Workers' Party Central Committee but in

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<sup>1</sup> For background, see Yossef Bodansky, The Korean Crisis: Kim's New Posture, and the US Position, ISPSW Issue No. 509, September 2017



reality the head of national intelligence for North Korea) and a delegation to attend the closing ceremonies at PyeongChang on 25 February. Kim Yong-Chol and his team conveyed Pyongyang's message of agreement to new relations to Moon and his team, as well as directly to the Americans in a few secret meetings with a host of senior intelligence officials accompanying Ivanka Trump to the closing ceremony.

These dates are of great significance to comprehending the true intentions of Kim Jong-Un. On 22 February, very senior KPA officers and WPK cadres were briefed in great secrecy about a memo personally signed by Kim Jong-Un concerning "the topic of Kim Yong-Chol". A senior official in Pyongyang revealed the content of the memo to The Daily NK (an organ of North Korean defectors with unique access to their erstwhile homeland). "The message contradicts the one being communicated to the outside world. The memo says that there is no intention to engage in dialogue with the American imperialists and that South Joseon [South Korea] will not act as an intermediary. The memo also emphasizes the fact that North Korea will never surrender its nuclear weapons." Kim Jong-Un left no room for compromise. "We [North Korea] will not make compromises with or even acknowledge powers that do not recognize our nuclear weapons and missiles," the memo stated. "The memo said that 'we need to have faith.' It also put forward the position that 'the world revolves around Joseon [North Korea], so there is no need to worry,'" the official explained.

The Kim Jong-Un memo sought to clarify the essence of Pyongyang's "outward position that it is open to dialogue," the official explained. "It seems like there's recognition that no matter how much South Korea helps out, as long as the US pursues its campaign of pressure [=sanctions], there is little chance that dialogue will work out. It's also possible to read into the memo and interpret it to mean that North Korea may pretend to freeze its nuclear program in a bid to receive assistance." The memo explained that there were multiple purposes for Kim Yong-Chol's visit to South Korea such as "testing the sincerity of the South Korean government," "dividing friendly and unfriendly powers," and "inducing [domestic] conflict within the South." Pyongyang anticipated the beginning of a major change in Seoul. "We will bring the liberal powers and politicians onto our side and exclude the powers that are not on our side. South Joseon has repeatedly said that it wants to create an environment for dialogue, so this will give us an opportunity to re-verify that claim," the Kim Jong-Un memo noted.

In early April, then CIA Director Mike Pompeo visited Pyongyang and met with Kim Jong-Un and other very senior officials. He impressed upon them the centrality of complete denuclearization and a tight verification regime. He accepted, though, that any denuclearization process would be very long (some 10-15 years) from a technical point of view. Pompeo stressed the US would assume that there would be no efforts at concealment and deceit by the DPRK.

In mid-April, Pyongyang decreed that Chagang Province was designated a "Special Songun [Military-First] Revolutionary Zone" which amounts to declaring the Province a strategic region closed for the military. The Chagang region is located in the north near the Chinese border. It is mountainous and sparsely populated. Most of the DPRK's clandestine strategic infrastructure is located in the region. There are reports that some of the DPRK's nuclear weapons are also hidden in deep bunkers in Chagang Province. Chinese senior officials concurred that the North Korean security authorities are planning "to conceal the country's nuclear weapons and associated material" in caves and bunkers hidden in the mountains.

Official Pyongyang clarified its true intent to senior officials. "Designating Chagang Province as a Special Songun Revolutionary Zone was discussed during a lecture for members of the Ministry of State Security," another senior official in Pyongyang told the Daily NK. He explained that the "lecturer said that making Chagang



Province a strategic foothold for the military in the face of modern warfare is the legacy of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il.” The lecturer “emphasized that the project must go forward without any issues because Kim Jong-Un was doing it out of respect for his father’s and grandfather’s legacies.” In the DPRK, there can be no contradicting or reversing the sacred legacy of Kim Il-Sung and Kim Jong-Il. Hence, by invoking this legacy Kim Jong-Un intentionally tied his hands irrespective of future dealings with the US. Moreover, the new designation of Chagang Province also means that all resolutions of the SPA and other government bodies in Pyongyang - such as ratifications of agreements and understandings with the US - do not apply to what is the heart of the DPRK’s clandestine strategic arsenals, programs and industries.

Thus, as far as Pyongyang goes, Trump’s Washington can give assurances but cannot guarantee they will be implemented in the long-term. Under these conditions, the best Pyongyang can really offer is permitting the likes of McDonald’s and Coca Cola to open branches in North Korea, as well as perhaps even permitting select American movies to be shown in Pyongyang and sports events (like basketball games) to take place.

However, the key to the rehabilitation and economic growth of North Korea remains in the hands of the regional powers - and thus beholden to their Eurasia-focused vital interests. All regional leaders are cognizant that Kim Jong-Un’s quintessential conviction that nuclear weapons and ICBMs are the SOLE viable insurance against decapitation (regime change) by the US remains as valid as before. There is no chance Kim Jong-Un will ever give up on his insurance even when the US focuses on denuclearization. Hence, the regional leaders accepted that the DPRK will retain nuclear weapons and strategic delivery systems that threaten the US and are ready to live with this for as long as Pyongyang is pacified and fully integrated into regional strategic-economic web of self-interests.

Indeed, Moon told the Chinese South Korea can live with a nuclear North Korea for as long as they don’t test anything and don’t do any provocations too blatant to be ignored. The Chinese cheered Moon and promised they got assurances from Pyongyang they would follow the script. Moon and Xi Jinping consider this approach the key to bringing stability and relative normalcy to the Korean Peninsula. Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe considers anything a better alternative to enduring nuclear threats to, and possible strikes on, Japan. Both Russian and Chinese intelligence have long realized that both South Korea and Japan not only “can live” with a nuclear North Korea - they prefer it to a North Korea amassing conventional forces and threatening widespread destruction as a deterrence of a US regime change. Hence, everybody is ready to placate Kim Jong-Un on the issues of nuclear weapons and ICBMs - that is, everybody except for Trump.

In early June, the US played into the hands of the regional leaders. On 4 June, Trump opined that the regional powers should finance the rehabilitation and rebuilding of North Korea in the aftermath of an agreement with the US. He explained that South Korea, China and Japan would be responsible for the massive economic aid North Korea would require. Trump added that the US is “6,000 miles away” and therefore should not be expected to shoulder the burden of rebuilding North Korea. In contrast, Trump explained, “North Korea’s neighbors such as South Korea, China, and Japan” should be responsible for all economic aid and other financial issues that would arise from an agreement with the US as “corresponding measures for [North Korea’s] denuclearization”. While the regional leaders are ready to fund the rehabilitation of North Korea - they would do so in pursuit of and within the framework of their own interests, and not these of the US.

By now, Pyongyang has little expectations from Trump’s Washington. Pyongyang is focusing on the growing relationship with President Moon Jae-In’s Seoul because he has personal commitment to a rapprochement. Moon dreads a repeat of the 2007 “incomplete summit” process that was initiated by then RoK President Roh



Moo-Hyun with Moon as his Chief-of-Staff and the driving force behind the policy and implementation. Moon particularly resents the US refusal to accept, in late 2007, the “maritime peace zone” agreement encompassing the ocean area between the disputed borderlines as claimed by North and South Korea. The US insisted on the RoK retaining control over the area in order to keep in place US intelligence and military facilities. Chinese and Russian senior officials claim that the North Korean frustration with the collapse of the Roh-Kim Jong-Il initiative led, ultimately, to the sinking of the Cheonan in 2010 in the waters that could have been part of the agreed upon “maritime peace zone”. Moreover, Kim Yong-Chol hinted on this logic when he met with Moon at PyeongChang. Little wonder that Moon is personally hostile toward Washington because he holds the US not only responsible for the toppling of the 2007 opening to the DPRK, but also for the ensuing suicide of his revered mentor Roh Moo-Hyun on 23 May 2009.

Moon’s Seoul is ready to start implementing numerous concrete joint programs with Pyongyang. According to Chinese officials, in their summit meeting in Panmunjom on 27 April 2018, Moon gave Kim Jong-Un “a USB flash drive containing economic development plans, including electric power infrastructure, railways and highways that could be built if Pyongyang works toward denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” South Korea will fund all these projects, Moon promised. Hence, the leaders in Pyongyang are convinced that relations and cooperation with Moon’s Seoul will set the tone to stabilizing the Korean Peninsula and removing the threat of war and sanctions from the DPRK. China and Russia concur and encourage the DPRK to persevere on the RoK venue.

Ultimately, the most important summits are the three meetings between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-Un in China (25-28 March, 7-8 May, and 19-20 June 2018). They were pilgrimages by the young Kim Jong-Un to a revered superior in order to get advice and guidance. Chinese experts noted that Kim Jong-Un was “eager to learn how to turn a developing nation into a global superpower.” Throughout, Kim Jong-Un repeatedly acknowledged to Xi Jinping that China is the dominant power in the region and the guardian of North Korea.

In early May, North Korean senior officials assured their Chinese counterparts that “China is indispensable to peninsula denuclearization.” The policies of Xi Jinping are behind “the dramatic change on the Korean Peninsula and driven by the restoration of the China-North Korea friendship.” Chinese senior officials concurred that Beijing’s leadership was the decisive factor behind the change in the North Korean attitude. “Without China’s participation, it would be impossible to reach an agreement on denuclearization and permanent peace on the peninsula.” The Chinese officials insist that Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-Un determined much of the agenda of the Trump summit. Xi Jinping, for example, overruled against declaring the symbolic end of the Korean War because this must be done in a quadripartite setting along with China and South Korea. Kim Jong-Un now accepts that Chinese-style reform process is the key to rebuilding North Korea - including Chinese dominance over the national economy and infrastructure. Indeed, several WPK delegations have since visited China in order to study reforms and some even had meetings with Xi Jinping in order to highlight their importance to Beijing.

Throughout, there developed a close personal relationship between the two leaders. The extent of Kim Jong-Un’s personal appreciation of the role of Xi Jinping is expressed in the personal congratulatory letter Kim Jong-Un sent Xi Jinping on his birthday on 15 June. Kim Jong-Un wrote that he “highly appreciated that the successive significant meetings with Xi Jinping served as an important occasion in deepening the special comradesly friendship and trust and more vigorously promoting the DPRK-China friendship, the strategic choice made by the two parties and the two countries, as required by the new era.” Kim Jong-Un reiterated the singular impor-



tance of “the DPRK-China friendship forged with blood and strenuously strengthen and develop it, unfazed by change of situation and any challenge.” This heritage sets the solid foundations for “the invincible vitality and inexhaustible potentials of the DPRK-China friendship, the valuable asset of the two parties and the peoples of the two countries, [that] will be more powerfully demonstrated in the future thanks to the joint efforts with Xi Jinping.”

For official Beijing, the new regional posture and the legitimization of the DPRK formalized by the Singapore Summit gave new impetus to the long-coveted extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) eastward. In mid-June, Prof. Da Zhigang, the Director of the Institute of Northeast Asian studies at the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences, articulated the contribution of the new posture of North Korea to Chinese interests. “By supporting North Korea, China will promote further peace and stability on the peninsula and help Pyongyang work toward opening up. An open North Korea will be essential for logistics and trade cooperation. The crux of the regional integration in Northeast Asia is the Korean Peninsula nuclear issue and its peace regime. With China promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, North Korea could be an important country connecting Europe in the west and Japan in the east. Kim’s visit not only shows North Korea’s friendly relations with China, but also reflects the urgent need to consolidate the hard-earned achievements on the peninsula after the Kim-Trump summit.” The relationship with Xi Jinping is of growing importance because “Kim’s China visits cement friendly ties,” Da Zhigang emphasized.

In the short term, China is focused on integrating North Korea into a regional system that will enshrine both stability and prosperity. In mid-June, Hu Weijia wrote a two-part analysis for *The Global Times* highlighting the view from Beijing. “North Korea will chart [its] own economic destiny with help of neighboring nations,” he explained, “it is North Korea’s neighbors in Asia - such as China and South Korea - that will be main external drivers of North Korea’s economic rise.” There is already significant progress along these lines. “Pyongyang has worked with Beijing and Seoul to develop special economic zones, which are likely to be the catalysts of the industrial transfer from China and South Korea to North Korea. North Korea’s demographic dividend will help the country undertake industrial transfers and integrate itself into the Asian industrial chain.” Ultimately, Hu Weijia concludes, China will be the uniquely dominant neighbor of North Korea. “Economic cooperation with China is likely to occupy an important position in the Pyongyang’s economic development plan. For instance, the two countries have large potential for cooperation in fields such as infrastructure.”

The initial economic and infrastructure development of North Korea will expedite its complete integration into the China-controlled BRI. “Getting North Korea on board the Belt & Road initiative will be easier than expected,” Hu Weijia stated. “Getting North Korea into China’s Belt and Road (B&R) initiative will help rebuild its economy and promote regional economic integration.” Hu Weijia concluded that the entire Far East, and not just China, would benefit from the integration made possible by the new posture of North Korea. “The B&R initiative is probably a good chance for East Asia to push forward the integration of economic and social development by involving North Korea in its economic network. North Korea has economic and geographic advantages to join the B&R, which will help the country realize its economic potential. It won’t be easy, and it won’t happen overnight. However, getting North Korea into the B&R initiative to promote economic integration may be easier than what people would have imagined.”

Seoul shares the overall perception of Beijing. Indeed, the first concrete measures undertaken by both South and North Korea were efforts to link and rejuvenate the transportation infrastructure. Starting mid-May, numerous teams of North Korean workers were observed fixing rail-lines and planting trees around the main



lines. "This flurry of activity seems to be connected to the possibility that railways could be connected between the two Koreas if the inter-Korean relationship improves," briefed South Korean senior officials.

Formal steps were also undertaken. On 1 June, the high-level inter-Korean meeting discussed "the possibility that the linking of railways and roads between North and South Korea" will take place in the near future. Consequently, South Korea renewed its effort to join the Organization for Co-operation between Railways (OSJD) and on 8 June was finally accepted. Significantly, the three previous attempts by Seoul to join the OSJD since 2015 were vetoed by Pyongyang. Now, Pyongyang and Beijing were the driving force behind the acceptance of Seoul. The South Korean senior officials stressed that the OSJD "makes important decisions on the use and operation of railways in Eurasia." Hence, membership is crucial for South Korea's joining the BRI rail system. The officials explained that the joining the OSJD reflects "the recent mood of inter-Korean détente, moving one step closer to accomplishing Seoul's Eurasian railway initiative." Seoul's ultimate objective is further integration into the BRI-driven Eurasian economic sphere. "Once a Trans-Korean railway becomes reality in the future on the back of economic cooperation between the two Koreas, it would be easier for Seoul to integrate the Korean railway into the Eurasian rail network."

By late June, the DPRK and the RoK reached specific agreements on linking their roads and railroads. The *Rodong Sinmun* emphasized the importance of a joint panel for cooperation in railway construction. "At the [panel's] talks both sides discussed the practical issues arising in reconnecting, updating and using the railways on the east and west coasts," the *Rodong Sinmun* noted. The KCNA reported that "talks of inter-Korean panel for cooperation in roads were held" in order to address cross border highway construction. "At the talks the North and the South agreed to simultaneously push forward the modernization of roads on the eastern and western coasts, discussed the ways for carrying it out." According to South Korean senior officials, the two sides "agreed to cooperate in modernizing the Kaesong-Pyongyang section in the western region and the Wonsan-Goseong section across their eastern border."

Meanwhile, Pyongyang sent Moscow comparable assurances concerning Russia's role in the future development of the DPRK as well as the use of its territory in order to reach the RoK. Kim Jong-Un presented Lavrov with a detailed plan and asked that it be given to Putin. The North Korean plan added the laying of oil and gas pipelines through North Korea all the way to South Korea and possibly even Japan. Meanwhile, Seoul also reached out to the Kremlin in order to discuss future common development plans involving Pyongyang that will not only address Seoul's burning energy problems (due to the crises in Iran and the rest of the Middle East) - but will also serve to balance the tightening embrace by Beijing.

On 23 June, Putin and Moon met in Moscow for a crucial summit meeting. Moon presented his "New Northern Policy" according to which close cooperation with Russia will take place over "nine bridges" - "gas, rail, electricity, shipbuilding, job creation, the Northern Sea Route, seaports, agriculture and fishing." Seoul believes that the most promising initial projects should include "linking Russia and South Korea with rail lines, LNG (liquefied natural gas) pipelines and their electric grids via North Korea." Moon and Putin reached concrete understanding on a comprehensive network of oil and gas pipelines passing through North Korea. Putin liked the idea of "linking South Korea to the Russian Far East via pipelines, electricity grids and rail lines running through North Korea," and committed to "commencing talks on a free-trade agreement" between Russia and South Korea. "President Putin and I have agreed to launch business projects to prepare for potential trilateral cooperation involving South and North Korea and Russia," Moon briefed his cabinet. "Launching joint research on connecting railroads, electrical grid and natural-gas lines will be a starting point."



In the longer term, the development of North Korea's national infrastructure is going to produce huge income for all the regional states. Back in mid-July 2017, South Korean Intelligence confirmed that North Korea is sitting on huge mineral reserves, including rare earths, under the northern mountainous provinces. Seoul has learned North Korea has "vast mineral reserves, including iron, gold, magnesite, zinc, copper, limestone, molybdenum, graphite, and more - all told about 200 kinds of minerals." Most significant "are large amounts of rare earth metals" that are crucial for the production of computers, smartphones and other high-tech systems. Estimates of the value of these mineral resources range between over \$6 trillion and closer to \$10 trillion.

South Korean Intelligence noted in summer 2017 the growing Chinese interest in dominating these resources. "With China in a position to buy up the North Korean supplies of rare earth (perhaps the largest deposits in the world) and North Korea in need of capital, rare earth trade links could open up, which could further increase Chinese control over these important elements." The tightening sanctions on North Korea made it difficult for China to launch new major mining projects - but all of this is changing now. Both China and South Korea have vested interests in exploiting the North Korean rare earths. South Korea is looking for secure supplies to its high-tech industries while China seeks to secure its dominance over the rare earth supplies. According to Russian and Chinese senior officials, Pyongyang agreed to exploiting the rare earths only under the joint umbrella of Beijing and Moscow in order not to break the political clout of their current global monopoly. Such joint umbrella currently exists in Mongolia where some mining is carried out by Western companies. Hence, North Korean delegations made repeated visits to Mongolia since May in order to study the mining sector.

As has long been the case for the regional states - China, Russia, North Korea, South Korea and Japan - there are two key major grand-strategic objectives for the energy-transportation system of the BRI and the forthcoming exports of rare earths - namely, to further consolidate the Eurasian sphere and to harness Western Europe. Europe is uniquely susceptible to any Russian-Chinese courting on account of a Eurasian sphere in the aftermath of the disastrous G7 summit in Canada. There, Trump positioned the US against everybody else because of their self-serving protectionist trade policies that are harmful for the US, as well as unwillingness to meet their obligations for defense budgets. Trump also attacked the current posture of the ostensibly sacrosanct NATO. "NATO is as bad as NAFTA. It's much too costly for the US," Trump told the other leaders. He implied that he weighs withdrawing US troops from Germany. Thus, any viable East-West economic boost made possible by the integration of North Korea is most likely to appeal to the Europeans even if it is against US macro-economic interests.

Meanwhile, on 29 June, US Intelligence officials leaked to NBC their apprehension about the continued nuclear program in North Korea. US Intelligence now believes that the DPRK has "increased development of fuel for nuclear weapons" at "multiple secret sites in recent months," NBC reported. "Work is ongoing to deceive us on the number of facilities, the number of weapons, the number of missiles," one official told NBC. "There is absolutely unequivocal evidence that they are trying to deceive the US." The same day, the pro-Pyongyang Japanese newspaper *Choson Sinbo* "slammed calls for the complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea," Elizabeth Shim of the UPI reported. The *Choson Sinbo* also stressed that the US would be held responsible for any change in the progress toward building trust with Kim Jong-Un and North Korea.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

### About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.

