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The Second Trump-Kim Summit: Outcome and Future Directions

Emily B. Landau and Shimon Stein

The second summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un aimed to achieve the dismantlement of North Korea's military nuclear infrastructure in return for sanctions relief, but ended abruptly, with no joint document or statement of the two leaders. Most likely the Hanoi experience does not portend derailment of the US-North Korea process, at least for now, and both sides apparently still have an interest to continue cooperation. At the same time, the US and North Korea will find it extremely difficult to resolve a basic contradiction regarding denuclearization. While the two sides will not say so, this means the process is actually much more about tension reduction than denuclearization, which will remain an unrealistic goal for the foreseeable future. However, tension reduction is not an insignificant goal in the context of relations between two nuclear adversaries with limited means to turn the situation around. What lesson is there for the Iran case? The process vis-à-vis North Korea underscores that negotiating with a nuclear state is very different from negotiating with a state that has not yet achieved this goal. For Iran, the North Korean experience further underscores the strategic significance of achieving a nuclear weapons capability, which accords the proliferator significant leverage over anyone who would have it back down. For the international community the lesson is clear: Iran must be stopped before it reaches its goal.

The second summit between US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, which was held in late February in Hanoi and aimed to achieve the dismantlement of North Korea's military nuclear infrastructure in return for sanctions relief, ended abruptly, with no joint document or statement of the two leaders.

According to Trump, the outcome stemmed from Kim's demand to lift all sanctions on his country upfront, in exchange for a promise to dismantle the nuclear reactors only at the Yongbyon complex. When faced with questions regarding facilities that are outside Yongbyon – in particular a uranium enrichment facility – the media reported that Kim expressed surprise that the US even knew about these facilities, and refused to relate to them. The North Koreans, who believe it was the United States that changed its mind at the summit, understood that they would not get their desired sanctions relief in return for

their partial “denuclearization” offer, and likewise felt there was no reason to stay in Hanoi.

How should the outcome of this summit, which did not produce the desired results, be assessed?

One of the relevant questions regards the wisdom of holding the meetings as summits between the two leaders, and expecting results at that level before details are worked out between lower level working teams. While this is a valid concern, in this case, it seems that both leaders preferred the top-down approach. The North Koreans have always sought leadership engagement with the US – for them it is an issue of pride and international legitimacy and stature. For the first time they faced an American leader who was more than willing to go along with this approach, and Trump’s acquiescence was well received. For Trump the decision was not viewed as a concession to Kim, but rather as being in line with his tendency not to see the value of bureaucracies’ involvement in such a process, and his belief that he is the ultimate deal maker.

Still, criticism of Trump suggested that the summit was convened without sufficient preparation. Yet if preparations were not sufficiently detailed, this is not only because of the US. Kim proved unwilling to cooperate with discussions held with Stephen Biegun, who was appointed by Secretary of State Pompeo last August as the US special representative for this process. Biegun was able to meet with his North Korean counterparts only in early February, in an attempt to set a roadmap for future negotiations and declarations, as well as a common understanding of the goal of the process. According to some reports, the message was delivered to North Korea that the US would not approve lifting sanctions completely upfront, but Kim nevertheless thought Trump perhaps might cave in to this demand.

Two points deserve mention here. First, the history of negotiating with North Korea over two decades demonstrates that regardless of the amount of advanced preparation, North Korea has been known to change its mind at the last minute. Whether this occurred at the Hanoi summit is unknown, but this is a dynamic that was evident repeatedly in the five years of the Six-Party talks (2003-2008), characterized by North Korea’s tactic of contradictions and backtracking. In other words, the issue of advance preparations is not the key for dealing effectively with North Korea. The second point is that for the first time the US flatly refused a North Korean demand for sanctions relief, underscoring that despite all the flattery bestowed by Trump on Kim, there are US redlines for negotiations. In the past, almost every round of negotiations ended with (unfulfilled) North Korean promises to dismantle, and (actual) lifting of US and international sanctions.

What does the Hanoi experience bode for the future of the process? Most likely it does not portend derailment, at least for now. The initial reactions of the two parties after the impasse suggest that they intend to continue to explore the diplomatic course and not burn the bridge they have established. In what could be a case of North Korean backtracking following Trump's announcement regarding the reason for abruptly ending the summit, North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho said at a press conference that they had only asked for partial sanctions relief – five of the eleven sets of sanctions. Trump also took a step back from the demand for immediate denuclearization by saying that a moratorium on nuclear and missile testing satisfies him for now. Moreover the Pentagon, in a confidence building measure (CBM), announced that joint US-South Korean military exercises would be smaller and held at a lower level.

These statements indicate that both sides still have an interest to continue cooperation. Another champion of the process of trust building is South Korean president Moon Jae-in, who declared that the Hanoi summit made meaningful progress. Nevertheless, the US and North Korea will find it extremely difficult to resolve a basic contradiction regarding denuclearization. Each side views the term differently: the US is focused on North Korea's nuclear dismantlement, while Kim wants the US to ensure that the Korean peninsula remains free of any nuclear threat, and of US troops. More importantly, the US is not likely to back down publicly from its demand of complete and verified dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program. By the same token, it is unlikely that North Korea will agree to the dismantlement the US seeks, and the US has only very limited leverage to try to force this outcome.

While the two sides will not say so, this means the process is actually much more about tension reduction than denuclearization, which will remain an unrealistic goal for the foreseeable future. However, tension reduction is not an insignificant goal in the context of relations between two nuclear adversaries with limited means to turn the situation around. Moreover, the top-down approach that both leaders wanted did succeed in jumpstarting the beginning of a process that might lead to an eventual transformation in bilateral relations.

Among the looming questions is how Kim Jong-un will deal with his dilemma of keeping the nuclear option, which is critical to regime survival, while at the same time removing the sanctions that pose a threat to North Korea's stability and economic development. Kim learned at the Hanoi summit that this will not be as easy as in the past, when his father conducted negotiations and was always able to secure sanctions relief. In this sense, Trump sent an important message by walking away – presumably hoping this will translate into some concrete concessions by North Korea.

Another open question is how long the moratorium on missile and nuclear testing will continue. This will be an important test of the durability of the process of tension reduction. As of now this is a temporary measure that was meant as an indicator of North Korean good will in the context of the summits. But as the Hanoi summit failed to ensure relaxation of the sanctions, resuming the tests is a stick that Kim can wave at any point.

Clearly the options for the US are limited, as the goal it has set appears next to impossible to achieve. It will have to find a way to continue to work on the bilateral relationship, including stability on the Korean peninsula and in the broader region, while gradually reducing expectations about the ability to achieve more than it can in the nuclear realm. On the positive side, North Korea does not harbor regional hegemonic ambitions, despite periodic flare-ups with its neighbors. As far as the direct threat to the US is concerned, America greatly overpowers North Korea, and it is hard to believe Kim would risk attacking it, although South Korea and Japan still have their own concerns. One issue the US should insist upon in any future negotiations is that North Korea stop all cooperation with other nuclear and missile proliferators, like Iran.

What lesson is there for the Iran case? The process vis-à-vis North Korea underscores that negotiating with a nuclear state is very different from negotiating with a state that has not yet achieved this goal. For Iran, the North Korean experience further underscores the strategic significance of achieving a nuclear weapons capability, which accords the proliferator significant leverage over anyone who would have it back down. For the international community the lesson is clear: Iran must be stopped before it reaches its goal.