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The Next Stage of the Korean Peace Process
Why Seoul Remains Optimistic After Hanoi
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When the U.S.–North Korean summit in Hanoi ended early, with no agreement whatsoever, many South Koreans were shocked. The disappointing conclusion shook the public's faith in summit diplomacy and undermined Seoul's efforts to foster parallel processes: for denuclearizing North Korea, building a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, and fostering inter-Korean economic cooperation. In short, South Korean President Moon Jae-in's strategy for bettering relations among Seoul, Washington, and Pyongyang after the summit was shattered.

The summit may have failed, but Seoul observed several encouraging signs. There was neither acrimony nor mutual recrimination at the summit, nor a sudden escalation of military tension in its wake. Considering Pyongyang's past behavior, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's restraint was unusual. U.S. President Donald Trump's response was also encouraging. He did not tweet anything inflammatory about Pyongyang in the summit's wake. Nor did he suggest new sanctions or the renewal of U.S.–South Korean joint military exercises. On the contrary, he expressed his unwavering trust in Kim and his commitment to continuing the dialogue even though the summit didn't end as he had hoped.

Moreover, if the [Singapore declaration](#) ^[1] could be criticized as producing nothing more than a joint shopping list of hopes, the Hanoi summit at least made clear each side's concrete and specific demands. For Washington, it was the final, fully verified denuclearization (FFVD) by Pyongyang. North Korea was also specific in its demands. As Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho elaborated at a midnight press conference after the summit was over, Pyongyang offered to dismantle the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon under the observation and verification of the United States in exchange for partial lifting of five UN Security Council sanction resolutions imposed since 2016. It was rare for North Korea to put forth such a specific proposal.

The Moon government sees such moves by both parties as positive signs. It believes that the Hanoi summit was only a temporary setback on the long, treacherous odyssey toward denuclearization and peace in Korea, and that talks between Pyongyang and Washington will resume soon. Nonetheless, the way things concluded in Hanoi left Seoul anxious about a number of potential ways in which future negotiations could derail.

POTENTIAL PERILS

The United States and North Korea went into the Hanoi summit with conflicting ideas of what would constitute a good deal. Seoul now fears that this gap between Washington and Pyongyang's demands will stall further progress. The Moon government initially thought that the United States could reasonably request that Pyongyang completely and verifiably dismantle nuclear facilities in Yongbyon now, while committing to dismantle additional nuclear facilities and ballistic missiles later; in return, Washington could offer the opening of liaison offices, a declaration ending the Korean War, and partial sanctions relief such that inter-Korean economic exchange and cooperation could resume. Seoul would stand ready to reopen the Kaesong Industrial Complex and the Mount Kumgang tourist project, two major inter-Korean economic projects in the North that were kept closed as a result of both international and South Korean sanctions.

Such an agreement would have set a firm foundation for the next phase of diplomacy. But when the two parties met in Hanoi, the mismatch between U.S. demands, which were overly ambitious, and the North Korean offer, which was excessively cautious, led to failure. South Korea will not easily find a halfway point between these two extremes as negotiations continue.

Indeed, not just the demands themselves but the timeline for implementing them have led to division and anxiety for Seoul. The United States has traditionally called for an all-or-nothing, “dismantle first, reward later” model, whereas North Korea has pushed for incremental steps in exchange for U.S. concessions. Seoul has made diplomatic efforts to narrow the gap, which until Hanoi it thought had been somewhat successful. U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Stephen Biegun’s January [speech](#) ^[2] at Stanford University, for example, emphasized a step-by-step approach and the parallel pursuit of denuclearization, a peace regime, and the easing of economic sanctions.

South Korea had been urging the North to take decisive steps toward the irreversible stage of denuclearization, as evidenced by Article 5 of the Pyongyang Declaration, which underscores the imperative of dismantling the missile engine test site and launching pad in Dongchang-ri under the observation of U.S. experts and the permanent removal of nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and the like. The small deal package that Kim offered in Hanoi was a kind of response to Seoul’s efforts. After the summit, however, Washington seemed to have changed its mind about the incremental approach. Speaking anonymously, a senior State Department official now [claimed](#) ^[3] that “nobody in the administration advocates a step-by-step approach. In all cases, the expectation is a complete denuclearization of North Korea as a condition for . . . all the other steps being taken.” The Moon government’s ability to make a deal between the parties, and to advance parallel processes, will be critically hampered if the Trump administration now rejects a step-by-step process out of hand.

The administration’s renewed hard-line stance in Hanoi may have been partly rooted in domestic political concerns, and the politicization of nuclear negotiations is yet another possibility that South Korea greatly fears. A new political landscape in light of the 2020 U.S. presidential election could divert Trump’s attention away from the North Korean nuclear issue. Trump tweeted that his former attorney Michael Cohen’s testimony before Congress affected the outcome of the summit. Trump may have felt that he could only pacify Democrats, along with the news media critical of his negotiations with the North, if he came back with a bold all-or-nothing deal, no matter how premature. Otherwise, he would return to face political fallout from the Cohen hearing and an uproar over a deal perceived as too conciliatory.

North Korea’s leader exercises absolute power and authority at home—but he, too, could face negative domestic political repercussions should negotiations falter. Conservative hard-line forces in the military and security services, who do not benefit from rapprochement, may start to grumble about Kim’s emphasis on peace-building and economic development. Kim has taken some precautionary measures in Hanoi’s wake. At his first public appearance after the summit, he reiterated that “No revolutionary tasks stand before us other than the improvement of the economy and people’s daily lives.” This declaration is likely a well-calculated political move to warn the military and other hard-line elements that negotiations will proceed. But if talks with Washington continue to stall, Kim, who currently touts an economy-first policy, could be forced to shift to the old military-first politics, thereby raising the risk of hard confrontation.

The Moon government, too, fears the political repercussions of Hanoi at home. At a time of protracted economic hardship in South Korea, Moon has bet on the peace initiative to bring him political gains. But without a diplomatic breakthrough, and with a general election scheduled for April 2020, Moon could face a daunting and uncertain future.

THE PATH TO A BREAKTHROUGH

Despite recent setbacks, Seoul remains optimistic about the peace process because the negotiation track is still open, and Pyongyang and Washington can be brought back to the table. Both sides should sustain their hard-won dialogue and build on the momentum toward reconciliation, making every effort to prevent the negotiations from derailing. Destroying the negotiation track is easy, but restoring it is damn hard.

Given the fragility of the relationship, provocative rhetoric and actions, no matter how trivial they may seem, can bring about catastrophic consequences. Policymakers should learn a lesson from the exchange of harsh rhetoric between U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui in May 2018, an exchange that almost aborted the Singapore summit that June. Mutual restraint in word and deed is essential for the resuscitation of negotiation. The surest way to derail the negotiations and precipitate a potential catastrophe would be for North Korea to engage in any nuclear or missile tests.

Both sides need to be prudent and realistic. North Korea is highly unlikely to accept the all-or-nothing deal that the Trump administration proposed in Hanoi. If Washington continues to balk at an incremental approach, an exit from the current stalemate seems inconceivable. Nor does the North Korean proposal at Hanoi seem workable. The United States will not exchange the permanent dismantling of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities and of nuclear and missile activities for the lifting of major portions of the UN economic sanctions. Pyongyang should offer more—

perhaps a commitment to dismantle additional uranium enrichment facilities—while expecting less, such as inter-Korean economic exchange and cooperation instead of sweeping sanctions relief. Otherwise, a win-win compromise will be unreachable.

South Korea has a pivotal role to play in the process's coming phase. On his way home after the Hanoi summit, Trump called Moon from the plane and urged him to take an active role in persuading Kim to accept a big deal settlement. But Kim perceives Washington and Seoul as working together, which means that Moon will have a hard time acting as a facilitator. To help Moon succeed, Washington should allow Seoul some leverage, such as greater flexibility in managing inter-Korean economic exchange and cooperation. North and South Korean leaders adopted the Panmunjom and Pyongyang Declarations in 2018 to promote precisely these initiatives, and Moon is obliged to implement them in tandem with the denuclearization of North Korea. Otherwise, his role will be fundamentally limited.

Seoul does not see the setback of the Hanoi summit as insurmountable. Prudence, mutual restraint, innovative ideas, and, most important, resumption of dialogue and negotiation can help overcome the current impasse. A compromise such as a comprehensive agreement on the exchange of FFVD for what Pyongyang wants, one that is implemented incrementally based on a mutually acceptable road map, is the surest way to achieve a breakthrough toward complete denuclearization and peace in Korea.

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[1] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2018-06-19/there-were-no-losers-singapore-summit>

[2] <https://www.state.gov/p/eap/rls/rm/2019/01/288702.htm>

[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2019/03/09/satellite-images-suggest-north-korea-planned-space-launch-even-before-hanoi/?utm_term=.6b8cb920c1ab