

After Hanoi: Lessons Learned

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It is a depressing and confusing exercise to read through the reports about what happened in Hanoi and what it means for the US and North Korean positions, both on abolishing the North's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capabilities and on normalizing relations between our two nations. We do not "know" very much about what either government will *ultimately* do to get what it wants, but we do know a lot about the elements of a deal that are in play.



📷 (Photo: Rodong Sinmun.)

President Trump was right when he said that we know a lot about the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile facilities, the places where they develop, build, stockpile and launch these weapons. Not everything, to be sure, but a lot. And we have learned a great deal about what the North Koreans want as part of their reconciliation with the US and the international community. Some of that became clear in Hanoi and immediately afterwards. Certain sanctions on the North clearly do "bite," and a variety of steps toward normal diplomatic and economic relations with the US are likely valued objectives of the North. Ending the state of war, opening liaison offices, and eventually concluding a peace a treaty, followed by normal diplomatic and political relations, come to mind.

Some think that these and other elements can be arranged during the course of negotiations to make a deal that will hold for a while or even permanently. Others think there is no deal to be made here, at least none that the US can make without lowering its goals, or should want to make at all.

Rather than add to the slicing and dicing of goals and estimates about the right mix of ingredients for a formula that would be appealing to the chairman and the president, I offer here some observations informed by my own experience negotiating within the US policy community and with the North Koreans.

First, whatever else might be said, the US and North Korean sides were not prepared for the summit, or at least not the kind of summit the international community had come to expect. There was no prior agreement between the two sides on what the deal would be, one that the leaders could embrace, endorse, sign and bring home as a plausible victory or success for which a grateful population would express thanks. Saying it was so, as the president did after Singapore, did not work and so we were spared any claim that the meeting in Hanoi had ended a threat and brought improved sleep to American citizens. We should not look forward to more summits in which the leaders come together without a clue about what they will leave with.

Second, the tried and true method for conducting national security negotiations, where professionals meet to negotiate over issues they understand to reach agreements they have reason to believe their leaders would accept, is a good model for what should happen next. Twenty-five years ago when the US and North Korea squared off in our first nuclear crisis, teams of professionals from both sides met, on and off, for sixteen months, first in New York and then in Geneva. The North's team was led by a vice foreign minister and, as an assistant secretary of state, I led the American team. Mid-level bureaucrats, in constant touch with their bosses in capitols, negotiated and ultimately signed a formal document, the so-called Agreed Framework. That deal put off North Korean plutonium production and nuclear weapons development for a decade before collapsing. It was better than no deal, always my standard. Now, both the US and the DPRK have identified professionals who know a lot more about each other and what kind of deal might stick. They should be given a chance to see if they can reach this standard.

Third, we should understand that these negotiations will take time—think at least months—and that they will be difficult with many apparently insurmountable obstacles confronted along the way. These obstacles might require a change in goals, an

expansion of the elements in play to make a deal, a crisis involving confrontation and the threat of force, old fashion brinkmanship, a change in key players in the government of one or the other state, or more time. They will certainly require patience, attention to the impact of domestic politics, creativity and a stubborn determination to bring home a deal worth considering as preferable to no deal.

Fourth, there is no deal that will make everyone happy. Yes, that is the nature of compromise, but in matters such as this one, there is more to it than that. There are more than a few important participants and observers of policy in Washington who have such extraordinary confidence in their own knowledge of the other side's intentions that they cannot imagine a deal that would be in their country's interest, and so would favor no deal to any deal that might be negotiated. From personal experience, I would offer that this is not a new phenomenon.

Sometimes this cynicism may be born of politics. The Agreed Framework was signed in October of 1994; a couple of weeks later mid-term elections were held in the US and the Democrats, who were responsible for the Framework, lost both houses of Congress. Skepticism over the value of the deal was replaced by important opposition to its implementation. Politics does not stop at the water's edge these days, if it ever did. At other times, analysts inside and outside of government become committed to a particular perspective, which is the lens through which they analyze both history and breaking news. We should not expect experts to come to issues that they know well with a *tabula rasa*, but we can hope for an open mind.

Fifth, as we think about "what might work" for us and for them, we should remember that there are others in the game: the ROK, Japan and China come to mind. The South Koreans have their own political divisions, but there seems to be a fair amount of enthusiasm for lowering tensions with the North and absolutely no wish for a second Korean War—and certainly not one brought to them by the United States. We should plan on taking account of the domestic political and security concerns of Seoul right now. Tokyo surely has a great deal at stake in most imaginable US-DPRK deals, but has not seemed to figure much in the calculations of the principals. The US needs to tend to its allies. And the Chinese can be counted upon to be influential, but not necessarily helpful. Consultation would surely be appropriate, while crude attempts at linkage across issues almost certainly would not be useful.

Finally, things could be worse. Indeed, they were worse not very long ago. It is true that the North Koreans have tens of nuclear weapons and are likely building more. The North also has ballistic missiles that may well be able to deliver those weapons to targets in Northeast Asia and possibly the United States. But the US and the international community have applied sanctions that handicap the North, and at least slow its ability to reach economic goals that we know are important to the regime.

And even more important, the US holds a key source of leverage in Pyongyang's long-standing concern about its security. At least in theory, normal relations with the ROK and the US, and the end of its status as an international pariah, are much desired and within reach for the North. Nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles—our top priorities—as well as other important issues such as human rights policies are non-trivial obstacles to a durable deal, but perhaps not insurmountable over time. In the meantime, the North must be dissuaded from adventurism in and around the Korean Peninsula, as well as from exports of sensitive technology and equipment to terrorist groups or rogue nations anywhere in the world. That means that the US should leave no doubt about its capability and will to use its conventional and nuclear assets to defend and deter threats to itself and its allies.