

Trump-Kim Summit II Runs Aground, But Negotiations Have Not Yet Sunk

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A breakthrough agreement between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un was widely expected in Hanoi. Hopes for peace were raised by reports that the two leaders would issue a declaration of peace, establish liaison offices, and formalize closure of the Yongbyon nuclear facilities.

Such a pact still would have been only a start, not a finish. But it would have included important specifics and offered the basis for expansion. However, it was not to be. The two governments cut negotiations short and cancelled the working lunch.

The administration's explanation was that Kim sought to lift all sanctions in response to eliminating just a portion of his nation's nuclear program, namely Yongbyon. Yet the North Koreans disputed this account, contending that they had proposed only a partial lifting of sanctions. If true, President Trump's decision to walk, even without anger, as he insisted, was harder to justify.

If the two governments could not agree on the degree of sanctions relief, they could have endorsed this approach and indicated that officials from both nations would be meeting to seek a satisfactory formula. They also could have announced several "easy" steps, such as increased efforts to recover the remains of Americans killed during the Korean War.

Perhaps Washington viewed the North's demands as excessive and figured an abrupt rejection would shock Kim into taking a more realistic position. However, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is not the only party with an interest in the proceedings. Seoul has made reconciliation a priority because it sees reconciliation as important as denuclearization. America's failure to ease inter-Korean economic cooperation is a major blow to the Moon government.

Cooperation with China and Russia is also necessary to maintain economic pressure. If Beijing or Moscow believes that Washington is being recalcitrant and therefore is the culpable party, they could complicate the Trump administration's task by relaxing sanctions enforcement. This would also advance other objectives as well, such as increasing pressure on the Trump administration to deal on trade and Ukraine-related sanctions by China and Russia, respectively.

Some U.S. analysts wonder if National Security Adviser John Bolton convinced the president to demand full denuclearization before granting the DPRK any meaningful concessions. Such an unrealistic demand could have shortened the latest meeting.

However, President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo both insisted that the talks in Hanoi made progress. There is no reason the two governments cannot move ahead. They should begin regular consultations about how to normalize their relationship.

With the latest meeting a flop, the parties should return to the short statement out of Singapore. As the North Koreans point out, it suggests a process: improve bilateral relations; create a peaceful regional environment; proceed with denuclearization.

For the first, the two governments should establish official relations of some form—liaison offices or consular ties, for instance, with a presumption that full diplomatic relations will follow. Doing so would not be a reward for the North but would create an ongoing communication channel. Early attempts to isolate the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China failed; making it difficult for Washington and Pyongyang to talk helps no one. The inter-Korean liaison office in Kaesong has been a great success, handling mostly matters of modest importance. But it has institutionalized the process of working together in order to resolve common problems. The administration also should drop its dual travel ban to and from North Korea. As to the second issue, a declaration of peace would formalize what exists. Thankfully, the war ended nearly 66 years ago. Although violence occasionally has flared—such as the seizure of the USS Pueblo a half century ago—all parties can agree that the war is over. Negotiations should then move to a formal peace treaty. Again, this is a statement of reality, not a reward to the North. Critics worry that it could be used to justify the removal of U.S. troops from the South. But why do they remain? The Republic of Korea enjoys a 50-1 economic advantage and 2-1 population advantage over the North. America's presence is an artifact of history that should be reconsidered amid the dramatic changes overtaking the peninsula. As for denuclearization, officials should begin the laborious, even torturous (and tortuous!) process of dickering with Pyongyang. Most of this work should be conducted by diplomats whose job is to negotiate. The principals should be called in only to make the tough compromises and bask in public applause when the final accord is signed.

It is time to forget any kind of omnibus accord, a “big bang” to simultaneously eliminate nukes and sanctions. Although cynicism regarding any North Korean demands is understandable, Pyongyang would be foolish to abandon its leverage and rely on American goodwill. That didn't work well for Muammar Gaddafi.

Instead, the two governments should develop a step-by-step process that improves relations, increases trust, and advances disarmament. Then explicit trade-offs need to be agreed to. How much is closing Yongbyon worth? Allowing in nuclear inspectors? Moving some of the North's conventional forces away from the border? Closing additional test sites? And the big kahuna, turning over a nuclear inventory?

However, the two sides could declare at least one early victory: formalize the suspension of missile and nuclear testing by the North and military exercises by the U.S. Put the respective bans on paper. Have the American secretary of state and North Korean foreign minister sit down and sign the agreement. Count it as a significant win for both sides.

Finally, Washington should see its primary goal as creating a stable, peaceful Korean peninsula. Denuclearization is an important means to that end, but denuclearization is not necessary to achieve that end. The U.S. is not threatened because the United Kingdom and France, and even India and Pakistan, have nuclear weapons.

Recent events remind us of the dangers that such weapons pose, but the biggest problem is the underlying relationships. Paris and London once fought multiple wars; today a resumption of hostilities is inconceivable. President Trump should contribute to an environment in which war between South and North Korea is equally unlikely.

Doing so won't be easy, but it's worth the effort. Which should begin today.

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