



## What next for president Donald Trump's Korea policy?

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When US President Donald Trump and North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un arrived in Hanoi last week, most observers believed that some agreement had been reached. Although the results weren't likely to be as meagre as in Singapore last year, they were expected to be enough to disappoint many of the president's critics.

However, the president pulled out early. Although he insisted it was not "an angry walk-out". Even so, his surprise retreat left governments in northeast Asia and beyond wondering about the future of US-North Korean relations.

As the summit approached, expectations were high. The president wanted to showcase a big win and reports circulated of a likely deal incorporating several steps, including a joint peace declaration and shutdown of nuclear facilities at North Korea's nuclear complex. However, the effort floundered on the latter issue.

The two sides disagreed over the extent of the Yongbyon nuclear facility's involvement and the degree of sanction relief demanded. Such issues are the normal substance of international negotiation. The fact that they were not sorted out beforehand indicates inadequate staff preparation. Indeed, Trump apparently tried to make an even bigger deal—all nukes for all sanctions—through the sheer force of his personality. However, Kim is not a man of illusion: he was brutally effective in cementing his hold on power and would not sell his nation's ultimate weapon so cheaply.

Despite fears generated by the unexpected break-up, neither government has returned to the confrontational rhetoric of little more than a year ago when even the US president was threatening "fire and fury". The participants indicated that discussions in Hanoi had been useful; Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed "real progress" had been made. Moreover, Washington and Pyongyang implicitly reaffirmed their deal halting military exercises and missile/nuclear tests, respectively.

In fact, the survival of this understanding may provide the best evidence that Kim Jong-un is different from his father and grandfather: if he eschews the traditional North Korean tactic of brinkmanship to get Washington's attention, he is setting his own course.

What now? The Trump administration should step back from its demand for full denuclearisation, which is unlikely, and instead emphasise building the bilateral relationship and turning Korea policy into digestible bites.

The first objective is to create an atmosphere in which the North could imagine giving up its nukes. Applying economic pressure to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) does not require isolating the country.

Washington currently bans travel to the North, which is precisely the wrong approach. The Trump administration should encourage increased international contact, inviting Pyongyang to join the larger international community. Doing so would demonstrate the end of what the DPRK has long called America's "hostile policy".

Moreover, increasing foreign influences within the North might be the best way to encourage moderation internally. The Kim regime is aware of the risks of engagement, having recently launched a campaign against foreign contacts. Trump should not make Supreme Leader Kim's job easier.

More broadly, the U should join in ending the state of war which still technically governs the peninsula. After all, Washington is demanding that the North abandon its most effective weapons without offering any corresponding reduction in US military capabilities. Such a disparity makes sense only during a time of peace. Declaring an end to the state of war—or better yet, negotiating a formal treaty ending the conflict—would offer at least symbolic assurance that Washington does not plan to initiate regime change if given the chance.

Perhaps even more importantly, the US should propose to move towards diplomatic relations. Many observers expected the Hanoi summit to lead to the opening of liaison offices in both capitals. In whatever form, the two governments should create and use an official communications channel. One of The US's dumber policies over the years has been to refuse to talk with hostile governments—at varying times the Soviet Union, People's Republic of China, Cuba, and others. Yet this failed attempt at isolation may have prevented direct bilateral conversations between Washington and Beijing which might have forestalled the latter's entry into the Korean War.

This is the time to increase contacts with the DPRK, to build the bilateral relationship while pressing the North to take the denuclearisation path. Diplomatic relations, the ultimate objective, should be seen as a form of communication, not a reward. Communication which benefits both parties.

Most importantly, the two countries should construct a realistic negotiating agenda for the future. The Kim government is very unlikely to fulfill the desired comprehensive verifiable irreversible denuclearisation (CVID) desired by Washington. The North has invested too much and benefited too much. Nukes have bolstered its stature and ensured its security. Unfortunately, the gruesome killing of ousted Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who abandoned his missile and nuclear programs in a deal with Washington, acts as powerful reminder as to why the US cannot be trusted.

However, the Hanoi summit reminded the US of Kim's strong, perhaps even stronger than previously realised, desire for sanctions relief. Rather than going all or nothing, seeking quick and full denuclearisation, Washington should break up both denuclearisation and sanctions relief into multiple steps which can be addressed one by one while building upon one another. Then negotiations should commence to develop a series of agreed-upon steps for both sides to take. Verified completion of one would lead to the next one, ad infinitum.

Even if the process stalled along the way, and no one who knows the issue should expect it all to be smooth sailing, past progress would remain. If the DPRK remained a nuclear state after ending testing, capping its nuclear arsenal, closing some nuclear facilities, and admitting inspectors, much good still would have been done. Further, negotiations which falter always can resume.

Washington should advance this process by encouraging South Korea to take the lead. For Seoul, reconciliation is existential. The Republic of Korea can advance its security by changing the North's capabilities, e.g., denuclearization. Equally important would be changing Pyongyang's willingness to use its capabilities. Although measuring the DPRK's peaceableness is a difficult task, Kim appears to be more practical than his father and grandfather and dedicated both to economic reform and international integration. Of course, as yet there is no evidence of any liberal impulses within Kim. However, there is nothing intrinsically inconsistent with Kim being a brutal dictator while turning his country into a responsible actor. While remaining wary, the US and the North's neighbors should do what they can to encourage such a shift.

China, too, remains important. The prospect of being cut out of the action by a DPRK-US agreement appears to have energised Beijing, leading to four Kim summits with Chinese President Xi Jinping over the past year. The People's Republic of China is likely to be more helpful if Washington assures the latter that US policy will not disadvantage it. For instance, even if the result is reunification, Washington would not turn a united Korea into a military base for use against China; indeed, US troops would be withdrawn upon reunification.

Japan and Russia also have roles to play, hopefully positive ones. However, to include them in the process Washington needs to account for their interests as well.

Despite the uncertainty, there is one obvious advantage of the president's dramatic early departure: quieting his critics at home. A bizarre coalition against peace with North Korea has emerged in the US. The first inclination of many neoconservatives and other uber-hawks in any foreign crisis is to use military force. Moreover, much of the left has flipped in favour of confrontation since Trump advocated conciliation. However, both groups praised his toughness in Hanoi, which gives him more room to manoeuvre on the issue in the future.

So far, the damage from the collapse of the Hanoi summit appears to be modest. Neither side wants to restart the "fire and fury" of little more than a year ago. As long as the North Koreans are not testing missiles and nukes and the Americans are not conducting military exercises, the two sides are likely to rely on diplomacy and restart talks. With more limited but realistic objectives, hopefully Washington and Pyongyang can find a winning path forward.

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