



The Trump-Kim Summit: Xi Jinping's Victory

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March 2019

Executive Summary

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* Ultimately, the outcome of the Hanoi summit will be considered positive because it further erodes the US ability to resist the historic mega-trends - the consolidation of the Chinese-dominated tributary-style system of relationships between China and its neighbors, and the consolidation of a Eurasia led by China and Russia. Trump's Washington proves anew that it remains oblivious to the unfolding of global history, and that despite all the economic and military might of the US - Washington remains incapable of blocking the march of history.

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Analysis

Xi Jinping is the principal beneficiary from the collapse, on 28 February, of the Hanoi summit of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un. The failure of the two sides to agree even on the fundamentals of an agreement reiterates anew Beijing's insistence that only a Chinese-dominated tributary-style system of relationships between China and its Northeast Asia neighbors can provide genuine long-term stability and growth.¹

The turn of events was not unpredictable.

Before the summit, the Trump White House refused to listen to advice and warnings from both Seoul and Beijing on just how serious the situation was, and to what extent the local powers - the two Koreas and China - were committed to realizing their own preferable solution. Washington was urged to comprehend that the key to success was in adapting the US expectations to the overall regional dynamics. However, Washington decided that all local powers were to further the US unilateral position even at the expense of their own vital interests.

Most telling was Washington's dealing with close ally Seoul. Immediately after the September 2018 inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang, the Trump Administration started incessant pressure on Moon Jae-In to postpone the then anticipated reciprocal visit of Kim Jong-Un to Seoul - originally scheduled for December 2018 and then January 2019 - until after the second Trump-Kim summit. Trump wanted to be able to leverage the forthcoming improvement of relations between the Koreas as part of the "payment" for the denuclearization of the North. It is in this context that the US markedly increased pressure on South Korea on trade issues and defraying the cost of keeping the USFK in place.

In return, Trump's Washington promised Seoul flexibility on the issues of denuclearization and sanctions when dealing with Pyongyang. Indeed, on the eve of the Hanoi summit, Trump and several US senior officials hinted, and subsequently stated publicly, that there was no rush to disarm the DPRK, and that stopping nuclear and missile tests was Washington's main goal. As well, the US was willing to consider partial or phased lifting of the sanctions given the right conditions. Significantly, Trump, Pompeo, Bolton and other US senior officials personally assured both Moon Jae-In and Moon Chung-In (the special presidential advisor for unification, foreign affairs and national security) of their commitment to a flexible and phased approach to a deal with Kim Jong-Un.

Indeed, on 26 February, Moon Chung-In formally briefed South Korean senior officials that the forthcoming Trump-Kim summit "will primarily revolve around the North's dismantlement of its Yongbyon nuclear facilities and the US' corresponding measures." Moon Chung-In added that his repeated conversations with the most senior US officials led him to believe that "the summit will produce generally good results and that an outline for a joint agreement should come into view around the morning of Feb. 28."

Similarly, the Trump White House sent reassuring messages to Xi Jinping and the Forbidden City. According to Chinese senior officials, Washington assured them of a very flexible approach and that every effort would be made to reach a peace agreement or cessation of the state of war. Beijing was willing to support such an initiative even though formally a peace agreement should include all four combatants - the US/UN, the PRC, the DPRK and the RoK. Trump also promised to remember Beijing's help in delivering Pyongyang during the trade/tariff talks and the forthcoming summit with Xi Jinping in Mar-a-Lago, Florida.

¹ For details see: Yossef Bodansky, Korea and the Return of China's Tributary States, ISPSW Issue No. 602, February 2019



Hence, both Beijing and Seoul urged Pyongyang to be forthcoming and flexible even though the preparatory meetings between US and DPRK senior officials had left Pyongyang in great doubt. Nevertheless, Pyongyang initially expressed high expectations from the Hanoi summit. On 18 February, the *Rodong Sinmun* Editorial stated that the DPRK-US summit would be an “historic turning point” for the region and the world. Still, doubts continued to linger in Pyongyang. On 24 February, the KCNA warned Washington of the ramifications of a failure to comprehend and cooperate with Pyongyang. Should this happen, the KCNA stated, the US “may face the shattered dream of the improvement of the relations with the DPRK and world peace and miss the rare historic opportunity.” Senior US officials assured their North Korean counterparts of Trump’s good will, pragmatism and eagerness for a successful summit.

However, in Hanoi, the US attitude was completely different than what had been indicated to the DPRK, the PRC and the RoK. Trump wanted a grand deal - “the big deal” - that will bring the dispute to a complete end. He wanted a fixed and specific roadmap that would include early on the unilateral dismantling of the North Korean ability to strike at the US - the Kims’ ultimate deterrence against a possible regime change. The US made specific demands as to which facilities the DPRK should dismantle and how North Korean nuclear warheads should be surrendered to the US. In return, Trump offered vague promises to transform the economy of North Korea into a great success once the denuclearization was completed.

Kim Jong-Un agreed in principle to a grand deal, but insisted on gradual phased progress and reciprocity - that is, the gradual lifting of sanctions as denuclearization proceeds. As first steps, Kim Jong-Un offered to destroy the nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and a moratorium on all missile and nuclear tests in return for lifting sanctions on the delivery of food and humanitarian aid to North Korea. He explained that the DPRK is in dire need for food supplies. Kim Jong-Un also wanted to introduce confidence building measures in order to prove to Pyongyang that Washington is not using the peace and disarming process as an instrument for expediting regime change. This gradual and reciprocal approach has always been the position of Pyongyang, and, for that matter, also Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow.

Trump insisted on an irreversible commitment to verifiable denuclearization (by providing detailed lists of the DPRK’s arsenals and facilities, and facilitating US inspections) before any lifting of sanctions could be discussed, and stressed that virtually all sanctions would be lifted only after the denuclearization became irreversible and near complete - that is, only after the DPRK would be in no position to threaten or strike the US or anybody else. “Trump spoke much about the economic development North Korea will enjoy if denuclearization is achieved, but Kim doesn’t appear to have been persuaded by this,” explained Paik Hak-Soon, the President of the Sejong Institute in Seoul.

Ultimately, Kim Jong-Un would not agree to Trump’s one-sided demands for “the big deal” - and Trump walked out.

Lee Seong-Hyon, the Director of the Center for Chinese Studies at Sejong Institute, concluded in the 4 March issue of the *South China Morning Post* that both sides “should have had a ‘realistic’ expectation from the summit: Americans are not prepared to end the war and the North Koreans are not prepared to surrender.” Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-Hui, who is in charge of the DPRK’s relations with the US and was in Hanoi, observed that she “got the sense that our chairman [Kim Jong-Un] seemed to have difficulty in understanding American ways of doing things, and American calculation.”



Despite the breakdown of the Hanoi summit, Kim Jong-Un resolved to keep the door open for the resumption of contacts, and even negotiations, with Washington. North Korean media called for the continuation of dialogue irrespective of the outcome of the Hanoi summit. On 2 March, the *Rodong Sinmun* reported that Kim Jong-Un was hoping to “continue productive dialogue to resolve these issues” and hold a “new summit” in order to “resolve the issues discussed in the Hanoi summit.” The *Rodong Sinmun* described the Hanoi summit as “a meaningful opportunity to develop North Korea-US relations in line with the interests of the two peoples.” The failure of both delegations to reach an agreement did not constitute a “breakdown” or a “collapse”, but was rather one of the “unavoidable challenges and twists and turns” that are bound to occur in the long process that reaching a genuine US-DPRK rapprochement is.

Meanwhile, North Korea continued to project business as usual. Kim Jong-Un remained in Hanoi for his planned “friendly state visit”, as he and his team visited several economic and industrial projects to see first-hand whether these approaches could be adopted. Significantly, the North Koreans visited hi-tech production factories controlled by the Vietnamese military but still exporting to the West. This option - of retaining tight security control over hi-tech factories far beyond the control exercised by China - appealed very much to the North Koreans.

Throughout, Beijing kept very close watch of the US-DPRK negotiations and the Hanoi summit. To keep Beijing up-to-date about the unfolding summit, Pyongyang dispatched on 28 February a senior delegation led by Vice Foreign Minister Ri Kil-Song. In his 1 March meeting with Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the KCNA reported, “Ri Kil-Song referred to the traditional DPRK-China friendship developing at an unprecedented level and underlined the need to intensify the strategic communication and cooperation between the diplomatic fields of the two countries and further the mutual exchange and cooperation in various fields.” Ri Kil-Song spent most of his time with his Chinese counterpart Vice Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou. According to the KCNA, the Chinese and the North Korean teams discussed “boosting exchange and cooperation in each field in this significant year by putting into practice the important understanding shared by the supreme leaders of the two countries and on the issues of mutual concern and reached a complete consensus of views.”

The Forbidden City was shocked by the collapse of the Hanoi summit. After all the assurances of flexibility and good will - Trump’s unwillingness to consider even the specific requests by Kim Jong-Un that Washington had been appraised of, and indicated inclination to comply with, rattled Chinese senior officials. Coming on the eve of the conclusion of the US-Sino trade negotiations - Chinese senior officials doubted to what extent they could rely on promises, positions and indications by their US counterparts.

Publicly, the initial response from Beijing focused on the US mishandling of the Hanoi summit and the regional and global ramifications of the summit’s breakdown. On 1 March, the Editorial of the *Global Times* observed that “haste, lack of preparation” by the US side were responsible for the failure of the summit. The main challenge, the Editorial concluded, was for the regional powers - that is, China - to put the entire process on the right track. “The most important task for now is to prevent the overall reversal of the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Otherwise, all parties that have benefitted from the eased situation will suffer losses. It is difficult to get the peace process under control, but a return to chaos will only bring more risks and uncertainties.”

On 2 March, Professor Wang Sheng of the Co-Innovation Center for Korean Peninsula Studies and of Jilin University wrote in the *China Daily* about the centrality of the regional consequences and the US responsibility to remedy the crisis. Trump should understand that resolving the crisis on the Korean Peninsula is a “tough



challenge for not only the US and the DPRK, but also China, the Republic of Korea and Japan. The US should therefore work out a long-term plan to resolve the peninsula nuclear issue. ... As for the international community, it should help the US and the DPRK to restore permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, because it would create development opportunities not only on the peninsula but also in the whole of Northeast Asia."

Most Chinese experts, wrote Shi Jiangtao in the 1 March issue of the *South China Morning Post*, are convinced that China would ultimately benefit from the collapse of the Hanoi summit. Professor Huang Jing of the Beijing Language and Culture University's Institute of International and Regional Studies opined that the current situation serves the long-term interests of Beijing. "There remains a huge gap in terms of what Washington and Pyongyang wanted from the denuclearisation talks and their bargaining ability." Huang Jing believes that "it would not be in China's interests if the US and North Korea can find a solution to the denuclearisation issue too quickly." Hence, the failure of the Hanoi summit serves Beijing's interests. Chinese diplomatic sources told Shi Jiangtao that "North Korea - despite its geopolitical importance - has been and will remain a useful card in Beijing's long game against the US as their rivalry unfolds." Huang Jing concurs. "For Beijing, it'd be better to hold the North Korea card than to use it," he said.

On the basis of reports from the North Korean delegation in Beijing and Chinese senior diplomats in Hanoi, the Forbidden City concluded that Kim Jong-Un considers his meeting with Trump a fateful turning point in the overall relations with the US. The summit had a strong personal impact on him. On 4 March, Shim Kyu-Seok and You Sang-Chul reported in the Seoul *Korea JoongAng Daily* that "a diplomatic source in China" told them that Kim Jong-Un's "health took a downturn due to the failure to reach a compromise with Trump." According to Chinese senior officials, Kim Jong-Un already resolved to curtail the negotiations with the US and instead focus on relations with China and reaching a separate deal with South Korea. The discussions with the delegation led by Ri Kil-Song already focused on this issue. Shim Kyu-Seok and You Sang-Chul reported that Choe Son-Hui told Chinese diplomats that Kim Jong-Un "was losing the will to continue denuclearization negotiations with the United States as a result of the summit." In Beijing, Chinese senior officials confirmed the veracity of Choe Son-Hui's assertion.

Kim Jong-Un took the train from Hanoi and continued straight to Pyongyang without stopping in Beijing and reporting to Xi Jinping in person. Shim Kyu-Seok and You Sang-Chul wrote that their source in China attributed the decision to skip Beijing to the deterioration in the health of Kim Jong-Un. However, Chinese senior officials offer a pragmatic technical explanation. The two annual plenary sessions of the PRC's legislative bodies - the largest political events in the Chinese calendar - just started in Beijing. The 13th Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference convened on March 3. This means that all senior officials, including Xi Jinping, are involved with the sessions, and, with several thousand VIPs and other delegates in Beijing from all over China, security is a nightmare and all hotels and official guest houses are full. Hence, it would have been extremely difficult for official Beijing to accommodate a visit by Kim Jong-Un.

However, on the eve of the summit, Chinese and North Korean senior officials expected Kim Jong-Un to stop in Beijing on his way home. The officials explained that Xi Jinping is most interested in Kim Jong-Un's first hand impressions about Trump and his team on the eve of Xi Jinping's summit visit to Florida. The Xi-Trump summit will take place when the Forbidden City is warning of profound crisis in bilateral relations. Chinese senior officials concede that Sino-US relations "come close" to being "beyond repair". On 28 February, Ian Bremmer, the President of the Eurasia Group, agreed in a *Time Magazine* article on the prospects of the Mar-a-Lago, Florida, summit. He used the same terms and opined that "deal or no deal, the US-China relationship is



beyond repair". Bremmer is more pessimistic than official Beijing. "In short, the US-China relationship is fundamentally broken, and no politically inspired, vaguely worded compromise will change that," he concluded.

Senior officials and experts in the Forbidden City have very low expectations for Sino-US relations irrespective of the Florida summit. They point out to the lack of meaningful progress in the trade/tariff negotiations except for the Chinese short-term concessions and willingness to purchase more US goods. The crises over China's acquiring of advanced technologies - from Huawei to the Made in China 2025 program - are irreconcilable and highlight Washington's growing hostility toward the PRC. The officials and experts stress that the PRC would never give up on the campaign to become self-sufficient and self-reliant in all hi-tech issues. The growing US hostility and pressure only reinforce Beijing's determination and resolve to accelerate the drive. The low profile of the Made in China 2025 program in Chinese media is only cosmetic and does not reflect the actual growing focus on the drive for scientific-technological excellence and self-production.

In this context, the officials and experts note, the bilateral discussions over "the US persecution of Huawei" have evolved into a fundamental issue. They highlight the dichotomy between the Trump White House's adamant refusal to intercede with the "American independent courts and legal system" on issues related to Huawei, and the constant US demands for profound "structural changes" to the Chinese economy and fiscal system by decree from Xi Jinping. The Trump White House keeps insisting on a change-by-fiat even after the Chinese negotiators explained that Xi Jinping has committed to strengthening the Party rule and system of institutions in the PRC as the key to withstanding the forthcoming social and economic challenges.

As US-Chinese negotiations intensify and the US hard-line positions are clarified, the officials and experts explained, Beijing's hostility and inclination not to help Washington only increase. Beijing is gradually turning to actively harming US interests and policies. The Forbidden City has already decided that the Korean Peninsula is an area where Chinese intervention can have huge significance and make a lot of difference. Originally, Xi Jinping instructed that the delicate negotiations between his protégé Kim Jong-Un and Trump be tolerated in order to help Kim Jong-Un. However, the failure of the Hanoi summit frees Xi Jinping's hand to escalate the Chinese drive to ultimately establish hegemony over the Korean Peninsula - the Chinese-dominated tributary-style system of relationships - and under it an inter-Korean reconciliation and rapprochement based on common macro-economic interests and integration into the BRI.

Ultimately, a key to the future of the Korean Peninsula is in Seoul. Moon Jae-In is not going to let Trump destroy the inter-Korean reconciliation and rapprochement process of 2019 the way Bush (43) destroyed the reconciliation process of 2007 - leading to the suicide of then President Roh Moo-Hyun who was Moon Jae-In's revered mentor and patron. Therefore, Moon Jae-In will be leading Seoul deeper and deeper under the Beijing umbrella as the sole way of protecting the inter-Korean progress from Trump's Washington. This resolve was manifested in Moon Jae-In's first comments after the collapse of the Hanoi summit where he swore to sustain inter-Korean dynamics. On 1 March, Moon Jae-In introduced his vision for a "new Korean Peninsula regime" based on a community "of peace and cooperation" that will depart from past conflicts and ideological divides. He explained that the new regime will "create a peaceful order in the coming century" in which "we will take on a leading role" and not rely on outsiders (that is, the US). "We will push ahead with a bold transition toward a new Korean Peninsula regime and prepare for unification," Moon Jae-In reiterated.

Japan will inevitably follow these regional dynamics. Indeed, Tokyo has already appealed to Beijing for help in establishing direct contacts with Pyongyang. Shinzo Abe is convinced that Xi Jinping is the only venue for



establishing meaningful relations with Kim Jong-Un - relations that are crucial if Japan is to remain an influential power in Northeast Asia.

In the longer term, the reverberations of the Hanoi summit will hasten the integration of the Germany-led Europe into the Eurasia advocated and led by Russia and China. Chancellor Angela Merkel epitomizes the growing all-European reluctance to cope with the US diktats as seen in the growing cracks in NATO, the refusal to banish Huawei from local networks, and other issues. Merkel's harsh reaction to Trump's claims that German cars were a security threat exposed the building Trans-Atlantic hostility and mistrust. Senior EU officials opined that "Merkel has turned the corner on the EU relations with the US," and has resolved to chart "an independent path for EU foreign policy." The creation of an EU army will diminish the need for NATO and thus markedly reduce US influence. Merkel sees the EU's future energy security in Russian energy arteries, and the EU's future economic growth in ties with East Asia via the China-dominated BRI. Now, the US blatant insensitivity to the vital interests of allies - mainly South Korea - as demonstrated in Hanoi will only embolden the EU to look eastward regardless of US relations and protests.

Ultimately, the outcome of the Hanoi summit will be considered positive because it further erodes the US ability to resist the historic mega-trends - the consolidation of the Chinese-dominated tributary-style system of relationships between China and its neighbors, and the consolidation of a Eurasia led by China and Russia. The US callous disregard of promises made to the PRC, the DPRK and the RoK, and the US introduction in Hanoi of new demands, demonstrated anew to both friends and foes that the US can no longer be trusted as an ally or a partner. Consequently, East Asia is getting deeper and deeper under the Chinese protective umbrella - thus reviving the Chinese-dominated tributary-style system of yore. Meanwhile, Trump's Washington proves anew that it remains oblivious to the unfolding of global history, and that despite all the economic and military might of the US - Washington remains incapable of blocking the march of history.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

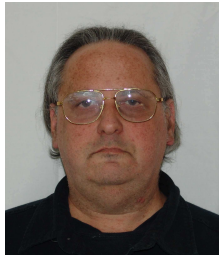


About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

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