ASIA 12.02.2019 | Mason Richey

A diplomatic odyssey

The Hanoi Summit or: How I learned to stop worrying and develop muted optimism for Trump-Kim nuclear diplomacy

Read this article in German or Russian.

I have been vocal in my scepticism about US-North Korea denuclearisation diplomacy. Iamnotalone, and for good reason. North Korea has a record of disingenuous nuclear non-proliferation commitments, and little from the Kim Jong-un regime in 2018 suggested that we should expect different behaviour this time. Additionally, the Trump administration's approach to denuclearisation summitry and negotiations in 2018 was rushed, amateurish and unrealistic. The Singapore summit last summer was organised hastily and with threadbare working-level negotiations; in the aftermath, Pyongyang exploited gaps between conciliatory Trump and his hard-line lieutenants, and US policy statements insisted on complete, unilateral North Korean denuclearisation compensated with little in return.

Consequently, the results of 2018 US-North Korea denuclearisation diplomacy were meagre. Kim laundered his image and got suspension of US-South Korea military exercises. Trump got political points for a photo-op summit and a North Korean missile and nuclear testing freeze, accompanied by cosmetic destruction of superfluous missile and nuclear test sites. Despite progress on inter-Korean reconciliation, in the second half of 2018 denuclearisation diplomacy stalled, as senior US diplomats Mike Pompeo and Stephen Biegun hardly interacted with their Pyongyang counterparts. Even today, Washington and Pyongyang do not share a definition of denuclearisation. Kim continues to produce nuclear-armed missiles.

Nonetheless, US-North Korea denuclearisation diplomacy in 2019 shows signs of progress. Washington and Pyongyang have subtly shifted positions on several significant negotiation issues, hinting at compromises unachievable in 2018. Crucially, Pompeo and Biegun are now taking serious meetings with counterparts in preparation for a second Trump-Kim summit scheduled for 27 and 28 February in Hanoi,

Vietnam. This sequel summit aims to make substantive advances on the four skeletal objectives of the Sentosa Declaration: improved US-North Korea relations, a Korean peninsula peace regime, denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and return of prisoner-of-war and missing-in-action remains.

A best-case outcome for Hanoi looks like what we wanted in 2018: a roadmap to mutually agreed, peaceful denuclearisation measures.

Fundamental conditions for successful summit diplomacy are present. As throughout 2018, the major summitry actors – Trump, Kim and South Korean president Moon Jae-in – all have powerful domestic political and foreign policy incentives to maintain diplomatic momentum. Of course, 2018 was a diplomatic dud, and now the stakes are higher for Vietnam, as half-baked results, like the Sentosa Declaration, will be difficult for Trump and Kim to sell as progress to domestic constituencies. This would militate towards a return to 2017-style conflict.

Fortunately, unlike pre-Singapore 2018, another fundamental condition for summit success is present: decent advance preparation. Unseen communication via intelligence channels has been going on for months. Pompeo and Trump have recently met with Pyongyang heavyweight Kim Yong-chol. Biegun has met his South Korean and North Korean negotiation counterparts in Washington, Seoul, Sweden and Pyongyang. Biegun seems finally to be getting respect from North Korea, which should allow him to continue negotiating aspects of the summit's substantive agenda. The fact the summit will feature two days of meetings—rather than one, as in Singapore— will give both sides more time to flesh out any agreements.

Building on the foundations

A best-case outcome for Hanoi looks like what we wanted in 2018: a roadmap to mutually agreed, peaceful denuclearisation measures that are simultaneous and parallel, incremental, substantive, comprehensive, verifiable, time-delimited and incentivised. However, this grand result is improbable, with a more modest roadmap comprising a piecemeal set of agreed actions more likely.

These possible actions are numerous, but seven seem to be on the table for possible combination in a limited Hanoi summit deal: a declaration of the end of the Korean War; North Korean declaration of its missile and nuclear weapons programme elements; continued confidence-building measures; North Korean dismantlement of a meaningful nuclear facility;

partial sanctions relief for North Korea; North Korean freeze of fissile material and missile production; and softening of the US military role on and around the Korean peninsula.

First, we have seen resurrected the idea of 'declaration for declaration', in which Washington would agree to declare an end to the Korean War in exchange for Pyongyang's (probably partial) declaration of its missile and nuclear weapons programme elements. This idea gained traction and then foundered in 2018, when Pyongyang expressed concern that its declaration would serve as a target list, while Washington realised the end-of-war declaration could provide political cover for demands to dissolve the US-South Korea alliance.

Two other commitments are also considered viable: Pyongyang's agreement to a fissile material and missile production freeze, and reduction of US military force projection on and around the Korean peninsula.

Several of Biegun's 2019 remarks, notably his recent speech at Stanford University, indicate this trade is again on the table, perhaps accompanied by Korean peninsula confidence-building measures such as continued suspension of US-South Korea military exercises, the return of remains and/or opening of a US liaison office in North Korea. A potential peace declaration might also bring China and South Korea into the mix, multi-lateralising Korean peninsula diplomacy.

Second, North Korea's permanent dismantlement of parts of the Yongbyon nuclear complex has also been identified as a possible concrete deliverable from the Vietnam summit. Obviously, a major issue is what 'corresponding measures' Pyongyang would require. Most probably, North Korea would demand relaxation of economic sanctions, though the US is reluctant to surrender this coercive diplomatic leverage. Nonetheless, comments by Biegun and Pompeo hint the US might be prepared to offer some relief. This would almost certainly exclude international sectoral sanctions, which would be difficult for the US to reinstate if necessary. A more plausible option would be exemptions for specific activities – such as Mount Kumgang tours or inter-Korean railway development – or lifting US secondary sanctions, which could be reapplied unilaterally.

Trump's commitment to his allies

Two other commitments are also considered viable: Pyongyang's agreement to a fissile material and missile production freeze, and reduction of US military force projection on and around the Korean peninsula. The latter could involve reduction of US troops and materiel

stationed in South Korea and/or relocation of strategic assets away from Asia-Pacific locations capable of attacking North Korea.

These steps are likely too ambitious for the Vietnam summit. The verification regime for a North Korean freeze would require strategic trust that is currently absent, while significant change to US force posture in and around the peninsula is disproportionate to what Pyongyang can credibly claim to offer on denuclearisation at the moment. Moreover, this downplays the fact that such a change would affect the US's entire strategic position in the Asia-Pacific region.

A combination of the above measures – some more likely than others – will be negotiated before and during the Hanoi summit along with a time-delimited roadmap to accomplishing them. Whether the negotiations produce agreement is another matter.

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Thinking outside the box, there is an (improbable) possibility that the groundwork of a successful Hanoi summit would lead the US to eventually negotiate a deal in which North Korea keeps some of its nuclear and missile arsenal, in exchange for shuttering its nuclear weapons programmes and dismantling its intercontinental-range ballistic missiles. The logic is that Trump cares primarily for US territorial security, which Pompeo and Biegun have also recently emphasised as the US's priority. This would leave Japan and South Korea exposed to North Korean theatre-range nuclear missiles, but Trump's commitment to allies is weak. This move would also take us squarely into a world of North Korean arms control rather than denuclearisation, with unforeseen consequences for nuclear proliferation.

Neither breakdown nor breakthrough

US-North Korea denuclearisation negotiations are ultimately likely to fail: Washington and Pyongyang have counterposed interests, no major accomplishments have been made and the Kim regime still has not publicly stated its willingness to denuclearise for concessions the US would be able to make. Indeed, this entire diplomatic odyssey could be Pyongyang's manoeuvre to mislead Trump. The top-down nature of the current process risks both collapse and Trump's tendency to negotiate

bad deals.

Those caveats stated, there is some cause for muted optimism, if not love, for Trump-Kim nuclear diplomacy. The most likely outcome in Hanoi is neither breakdown nor breakthrough, but a modestly fruitful compromise roadmap containing some meaningful but non-decisive commitments to action from both sides. After that, expect continued muddling through in the medium term. The world should be prepared for failure, but ready to support incremental successes.



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