GLOBAL 08.10.2019 | Mason Richey

# The US's denial about North Korea

## It only took one day for US-North Korea talks to break down again. And Kim's January 2020 deadline is just edging closer

*Read this article in German or Russian.*

After a seven month hiatus, on 4 October 2019 the US and North Korea resumed working-level discussions on denuclearisation. This welcome, high-stakes development crashed and burned immediately, with North Korea declaring the talks a failure one day later. This does not augur well for a happy conclusion to the last twenty months of fitful Korean peninsula diplomacy. Indeed, Pyongyang has indicated a January 2020 deadline for progress, after which it intends to return to aggressive, destabilising behavior. In this context, how should we understand the failed resumption of denuclearization talks?

Following the failed Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi in February, descriptors of denuclearisation negotiations between the US and North Korea were not positive: locked, deadlocked, stuck, broken, stalled. Officially speaking this was true, and even a theatrical Trump-Kim meeting at the Korean DMZ in June did not generate momentum to get working-level talks back on track. But to understand the Stockholm failure, it is important to grasp how Pyongyang did not stop negotiating during the last seven months of official silence.

First, Pyongyang's official silence actually spoke volumes. The fact that it refrained from commenting officially on possible resumption of official talks, which both Washington and Seoul claimed multiple times would begin 'within a few weeks,' (a) underlined Kim's dissatisfaction with the US offer at Hanoi, and (b) indicated that Pyongyang did not feel pressure (economic or otherwise) to return to negotiations. North Korea's official silence was a sign that it felt time was on its side, and that it would only return to official talks from a perceived position of strength.

Second, North Korea's flurry of missile and rocket launches, culminating in the 1 October successful test of a new medium-range SLBM, sent an unmistakable message to US negotiators: Pyongyang will never fully trade

away its nuclear weapon program and any attempted deal with that scenario as endpoint is dead-on-arrival.

Third, and most relevant for the Stockholm collapse, Pyongyang may have rejected official talks over the last seven months, but it commented unofficially quite verbosely: there was a stream of verbiage criticising South Korean and US'hostile policies,' expressing dissatisfaction with US officialsandnegotiators, and urging the US to create a new calculation method for the complex of issues connected to denuclearisation, sanctions relief, and security guarantees. This was pre-negotiation negotiation, an attempt to create leverage and sculpt the agenda for eventual talks. Crucially, as the North Korean read-out of the negotiations intimates, the 'new calculation method' requires US concessions for actions Pyongyang has undertaken during 2018-2019: destruction of the Punggye-ri nuclear test site, dismantlement of the Sohae launch facility, nuclear and long-range testing moratoria. US envoy Stephen Biegun's team did not meet Pyongyang's expectations for the 'new calculation method.' The North Koreans walked away.

This is bitter. Throughout the February to September negotiation doldrums, and despite the North's missile tests, the US repeated its willingness to talk, both throughthe media and back channels to Pyongyang. Over time Washington indicated openness to a limited, phased deal rather than a big bang denuclearisation solution. The insistence on the latter in Hanoi had been a major factor in the failure there. North Korean officials and new chief negotiator Kim Myong-gil had begun expressinggreater optimism about resumed negotiations. Now, hopes seem dashed.

## The next steps: three scenarios

How do things stand now? There are at least three possibilities:

(a) The first, optimistic scenario is that North Korea is bluffing for leverage and will return to negotiations in a few weeks, as offered by Sweden and accepted by the US. It is easy to argue that Washington and Pyongyang are at square one: there is still no common definition of denuclearisation, much less a 'roadmap' for getting there. Nonetheless, although US-North Korea diplomacy over the last twenty months has been amateurish, both sides have developed some shared understanding of respective priorities. So if Pyongyang returns to negotiations, Washington is not empty handed. *Vox* reported prior to the Stockholm meeting that the US was prepared to offer a thirty-six month suspension of UN sectoral sanctions on North Korean textile and coal exports in exchange for 'verifiable closure of the Yongbyon nuclear facility and

another measure, most likely end of North Korea's uranium enrichment.'

This would be a modified version of the 'Yongbyon plus alpha' proposal the US proffered in Hanoi. Critically, if the report of the offer is true, it was the US's starting position, indicating room for either reducing the US's ask in exchange for the same sanctions suspension, or keeping the ask while increasing the value of sanctions suspension. Information also leaked that the US could consider allowing partial resumption of tourism at the Mount Keumgang complex.

***Stockholm may not be the last tango for US-North Korea nuclear diplomacy, but the clock is ticking. Ring the bell for Round 2.***

In this scenario, the biggest question is whether Kim Jong-un's negotiating team would be empowered to negotiate substantive matters. This was not the case in previous working-level sessions, which largely set aside discussions over tough denuclearisation-sanctions-security trade-offs, instead focusing on leader summits. Time would tell if Kim Myong-gil could actually engage Stephen Biegun on substance, or if his remit would be confined to brokering a third Trump-Kim summit.

If the former situation is the case, then the big question will be whether Pyongyang's understanding of scope, phasing/sequencing, verification, enforcement, and denuclearisation end state has any chance of overlapping with what Washington could accept. There is no shortage of denuclearisation-sanctions-security trade-off plans from the US side — modified 'Yongbyon plus alpha,' proportionate bargain schemes, etc. — but there is little evidence that Pyongyang is interested in denuclearisation at a price and scope acceptable to Washington.

(b) A second possibility is that North Korea is dead serious about being treated as a de facto nuclear weapon power during negotiations and believes time and weakening sanctions enforcement are on its side, making its maximalist position likely to prevail. Essentially Pyongyang would only return to negotiations if they included sanctions relief for measures already taken, and were about arms control (extracted at a high price) rather than denuclearisation, which would be implicitly off the table. Despite the security and proliferation risks entailed, the US might consider this the most realistic (least bad) option. Entering negotiations on these terms would be a humiliating climbdown for the US, but the Trump White House has spun worse into election gold.

(c) A third possibility is that Pyongyang and Washington continue to misestimate each other's respective resolve and overestimate their own

position. If both sides are recalcitrant post-Stockholm, Kim Jong-un's January 2020 deadline will arrive unmet. North Korea will continue qualitative and quantitative improvement of its nuclear weapons program and arsenal, and there is significant chance of return to a 2017-style crisis.

## Known unknowns cut both ways

There is at least one big wild card at play in the current US-North Korea denuclearisation stand-off: Trump's likely impending impeachment in the run-up to the 2020 presidential campaign. The White House would presumably welcome the positive press from any summit predicated on substantive progress on the North Korea dossier. Yet Trump will be distracted by impeachment, which may complicate the bargaining possibilities for Biegun's team. North Korea's perception of Trump's predicament is also unknown: Pyongyang may press its hand, sensing weakness in the White House, or it may apply the brakes, assuming any deal is vulnerable to reversal by a new incoming administration.

Kim's January 2020 deadline for denuclearisation progress also cuts both ways. It is a useful tactic for applying pressure to a US side that needs a win. Yet it also ties Kim's hands, as failure to reach a deal will force him to either make good on his promise to escalate dangerously by going 'in a different direction,' or suffer credibility loss, if the deadline passes with no reaction.

Stockholm may not be the last tango for US-North Korea nuclear diplomacy, but the clock is ticking. Ring the bell for Round 2.

---



**Mason Richey**
Seoul

Mason Richey is associate professor of international politics at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (Seoul, South Korea), editor-in-chief of the *Journal of East Asian Affairs* and president of the Korea International Studies Association.