

Walkout in Hanoi: The Second Trump-Kim Summit

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Global Research, March 01, 2019

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“Sometimes you have to walk and this was one of those times.” That was US President Donald Trump’s remark about something he has been doing a lot of lately: walking away from agreements or understandings in the hope of reaching the ultimate deal. North Korea’s Kim Jong-un had been pressing his advantage in Hanoi with an attempt to convince Trump that sanctions needed to be eased. He ended up seeing the back of Trump after the appropriate handshakes.

The loose drama at such events is often hard to detach from the firmly rooted substance. Trump’s relationship with the accurate is tenuous and free flowing, so we have little to go on. Ahead of the meeting, the White House was busy sending various signals designed to baffle and confuse friend and foe alike. The president was keen to praise the “special relationship” with Kim, the sort of term reserved for gatherings such as those between the UK and US.

At the end of January, Stephen Biegun, designated special representative for North Korea in the US State Department, [suggested](#) that Pyongyang had made a commitment in pre-summit talks to eliminate uranium and plutonium enrichment facilities for a price. His mood seemed to jar with the more bellicose stance taken by national security adviser and pro-bombing enthusiast John R. Bolton and fellow belligerent companion and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

In carefully chosen words, the representative noted how,

“Chairman Kim qualified next steps on North Korea’s plutonium and uranium enrichment facilities upon the United States taking corresponding measures.”

Biegun was optimistic at the time, drawing upon themes of flexibility and novelty.

“Neither leader is constrained by traditional expectations that might doom their teams to try the exact same approach as in the past, with no expectation of anything but the same failed outcome.”

The president’s preliminary chats over dinner with Kim prior to the formal summit did not give much away.

“Great meetings and dinner tonight in Vietnam with Kim Jong Un of North Korea,” he [tweeted](#). “Very good dialogue. Resuming tomorrow!”

Those aching for detail were left disappointed. By breakfast the next day, things had cooled. Cancellations of a working lunch followed.

The smoke has yet to clear, and may be hovering for some time yet. But Trump was impressed by Kim's offer to dismantle the enrichment facility at Yongbyon in its entirety (though it is clear that the totality of the DPRK's capacity goes beyond it). The discussion and proposed transaction list seemed somewhat threadbare; a total lift of sanctions for Yongbyon's dismantling? According to Trump,

“Basically they wanted the sanctions lifted in their entirety, but we couldn't do that.”

The response was not long in coming. Ri Yong-ho, North Korea's foreign minister, [suggested](#) another version, somewhat more nuanced, less absolute: that only some sanctions be lifted in exchange for the permanent and complete dismantling of the main facility, verified by US experts.

“Given the current level of trust between North Korea and the United States, this was the maximum step for denuclearization we could offer.”

Prior to the summit, there was a transfixed terror that Trump was going to give all earthly concessions, and a good number of goods on gold platter, to the North Korean leader. A bemused Trump simply [deemed](#) it “false reporting” on his “intentions with respect to North Korea.” Both parties would “try very hard to work something out on Denuclearization & then making North Korea an Economic Powerhouse.”

This was far from the case. As Joel S. Wit and Jenny Town [note](#) with some accuracy,

“It's ironic that while most pundits and the media kept up a steady drumbeat that he was going to give away the store, he did just the opposite, holding out for a better deal.”

The issues at stake here on the Korean Peninsula seem monumental, but when seen together, constitute the pieces of a jigsaw. Any comprehensive talks will have to address these, and this summit was evidently not going to do that. To only see one or two pieces in isolation (abductees, for instance, or the issue of exclusive, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation) is to ignore the numbers of steps in the entire affair.

Trust needs to be restored, a peace treaty neutering the war status of the Peninsula signed, undertakings against the use of force and hostile intent made with heft, and ultimately, an understanding that the parties at the negotiating table aren't going to bump you off. Pyongyang is being asked to relinquish its highest grade insurance in the face of a superpower which has shown more than an unhealthy tendency to inflict regime changes with catastrophic consequences. Brinkmanship and theories of managed lunacy in the diplomatic realm will only get you to a point.

With Trump being advised by the likes of the gun slinging Bolton (known in North Korean circles as the paternal inspiration for Pyongyang's nuclear program) and Kim ever mindful

about the vulnerabilities of his regime, more walkouts are bound to happen. As Jeffrey Lewis [rightly noted](#), the old guard (Bolton and company) represent “the cold wind” and “pretty much the rest of the government bureaucracy.” The warmth of reform in securing peace on the Korean Peninsula, spurred on by the fanning of South Korea’s Moon Jae-in and the likes of Biegun, act as counters. This walkout, at least, means that each can live to talk another day, though it will keep their respective public relations teams busy.

As matters stand, there will be no resumption of North Korean ballistic and nuclear testing, and a promise for more negotiations. The chatter will continue, and channels will remain open. As for Trump itself,

“This wasn’t a walkaway like you get up and walk out. No, this was very friendly. We shook hands.”

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Featured image: President Donald J. Trump and Kim Jong Un, Chairman of the State Affairs Commission of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea meet for a social dinner Wednesday, Feb. 27, 2019, at the Sofitel Legend Metropole hotel in Hanoi, for their second summit meeting. (Official White House Photo by Joyce N. Boghosian)

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