

RECOVERING FROM THE HANOI SETBACK

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

The [much awaited Hanoi summit](#) (February 27-28) between U.S. President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un ended abruptly. A working lunch and the signing ceremony were cancelled, [leading to speculation that the talks had collapsed](#). This may be a premature conclusion. Mr. Trump, 72, has shown, time and again, that while he may be a novice at nuclear negotiations, he is a master of 'The Art of the Deal' and a reality TV star. For him, summitry is about political timing. Mr Kim, though less than half Mr. Trump's age seems to have a natural knack for it too. The Trump–Kim bromance is like a three act opera and after two acts (Singapore in June 2018 and Hanoi), this is the Intermission, with a final act yet to unfold.

Remember the suspense before Act I, which took place despite all odds. There was initial optimism when U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a surprise visit last May to Pyongyang, returning successfully with three U.S. detainees. Days later, National Security Adviser John Bolton bunged a spanner in the works by proposing the "Libyan model" for North Korea's denuclearisation. North Korea reacted strongly with Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Kim Kye-gwan indicating that it would be forced to reconsider the summit if the U.S. insisted on driving it into a corner. Mr. Trump backtracked, released the letter he had sent to Mr. Kim, expressing regret about the delay and adding that he was still hopeful. He also publicly distanced himself from Mr. Bolton's remarks by pointing out that what he wanted with North Korea was 'a deal'. South Korean President Moon Jae-in stepped in, visiting Washington in May and, on his return, meeting Mr. Kim at Panmunjom to restore calm. By the end of the month, the vice-chairman of the central committee, Gen. Kim Yong-chol, was in the U.S. meeting Mr. Pompeo and carrying a personal letter from Mr. Kim to Mr. Trump. And the June summit was restored!

Singapore sling: When Trump meets Kim Jong-un

While the summit resulted in a joint statement holding out tantalising prospects of establishing a new period of U.S.-North Korea relations, building a lasting and robust peace on the Korean peninsula and Mr. Kim reaffirming his firm commitment to the denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula, what was striking was the growing trust and respect between the two leaders. An unexpected personal chemistry had been established.

Fast forward to Hanoi, Act II. Expectations were set high. Stephen Biegun, appointed Special Representative for North Korea last year, had hinted that forward movement on ending the 'war' was possible. The 1950-53 Korean War, which led to the division of the peninsula and claimed nearly three million lives, was paused with the 1953 Armistice Agreement. For North Korea, any move towards formalising peace is a step towards regime legitimacy. While a formal peace treaty would require U.S. Senate ratification, political steps towards normalisation would not. North Korea expected some acknowledgement of its continuing restraint with regard to testing and unilateral moves hinting at closing down some test sites.

Hanoi hiccup: on Kim-Trump summit

Both Mr. Trump and Mr. Kim were aware that differences about 'denuclearisation' persisted. For North Korea, it means 'denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula', North Korea dismantling its facilities and giving up its arsenal to go hand in hand with a permanent peace that removes the U.S. military threat and normalisation. For the U.S., 'denuclearisation' is frontend loaded,

implying complete, verifiable and irreversible disarmament that requires North Korea to bring nuclear military activity to a halt, make a full declaration and subject itself to international verification, before sanctions are lifted.

Mr. Trump had indicated that he was happy about the continued ban on nuclear and missile testing and not in a hurry. However, the pitch was queered by intelligence reports surfacing that in addition to the principal nuclear facility (Yongbyon), North Korea had built another uranium enrichment facility at Kangson. It put a question mark on Mr Kim's commitment to 'denuclearisation'. Another report indicated that though the Punggye-ri test site was shut, continued plutonium production and uranium enrichment during the last 12 months would have enabled North Korea to add up to seven devices to its existing arsenal estimated at 30 devices.

These disclosures diminished the value of North Korea's offer of closing Yongbyon, which houses reactors (one for plutonium production and the older one possibly for tritium) in addition to an enrichment facility. Mr. Trump had accepted the idea of a road map but instead of working out the details, he prefers to rely on his sense of political timing to conclude a successful deal. Further, there was a growing perception that he was in too much of a hurry, which meant that any agreement would be modest and likely be labelled a bad deal by the non-proliferation hardliners. He cleverly chose 'no deal' to a 'bad deal' — and the curtain came down on Act II.

It seems the U.S. demanded more than Yongbyon, which was more than North was willing to give. Mr. Trump said, "It was all about sanctions. They wanted the sanctions lifted in its entirety and we couldn't do that. Sometimes, you have to walk and this was one of those times." His regret was evident when he added, "When we walked away, it was a very friendly walk." North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho claimed they had "demanded only partial sanctions relief in exchange for dismantling Yongbyon". Whatever the reasons, reactions on both sides have been restrained. A return to the rhetoric of 'fire and fury' therefore seems unlikely.

Right now, the mantra in Washington is that no deal is better than a bad deal. Yet, realisation will soon dawn that the current situation only permits North Korea's stockpile to grow as there is zero likelihood for Chinese and Russian support for further tightening of sanctions. There are no plans for a third summit though Mr. Trump said that he "remained optimistic about a positive future outcome", adding, "there is a warmth that we have and I hope that stays." Mr. Pompeo acknowledged "real progress" and said the "U.S. is ready to get back to the table to continue the talks".

Dickey détente

It is likely that during this Intermission, South Korea will step up its diplomacy with both Washington and Pyongyang. Mr. Moon has played a low-key but critical role in nurturing the process. Domestically, he has staked a lot, having had three meetings with Mr. Kim last year, including one in Pyongyang. Since last May, both sides have refrained from hostile activities and propaganda, the demilitarised zone (DMZ), is peaceful, landmines have been removed and some maritime confidence-building measures put in place. With economic troubles at home and hardliners in Seoul accusing him of being over-optimistic and naive, he is vulnerable. The South Korean Constitution only provides one term for the President and Mr. Moon is confident about the legacy he wants to leave behind.

More has been achieved during the last year since the collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2002 when U.S. President George W. Bush included North Korea in his "axis of evil" speech. Between then and 2017, North Korea carried out six nuclear tests, including one believed to be a fusion device, and over a 100 missile tests, demonstrating intercontinental ballistic missile capability. Mr. Moon's goal is to register sufficient progress on both 'normalisation' and the

'denuclearisation' tracks so that the process becomes irreversible. Such a breakthrough needs a top-led process.

And so an Act III is likely. The hardliners will eventually recognise virtue in a step-by-step process as long as it is irreversible. A new stage will have to be found, Bangkok, even Hong Kong if China cooperates. But the cast is willing. After all, it is the blossoming of a beautiful relationship.

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