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Trump-Kim Summit II: Challenges of Nuclear Issues to Regional Peace

By Barry Desker

SYNOPSIS

As President Trump and Chairman Kim converge in Hanoi for their second summit, the key question is whether this will lead to any real breakthrough.

COMMENTARY

US PRESIDENT Donald Trump will meet Chairman Kim Jong-Un of North Korea (DPRK) for their second summit in Hanoi on 27-28 February. This meeting occurs barely eight months after their epoch-making summit in Singapore on 12 June 2018.

They had issued a signed joint statement agreeing to a commitment to establish new US/DPRK relations, build a lasting and stable peace regime on the Korean peninsula, work towards the complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and recover and repatriate the remains of American soldiers from the Korean War.

Developments since the Singapore Summit

Following the summit, President Trump announced the discontinuation of 'provocative' joint exercises with South Korea (ROK) and stated his intention to bring US forces back from South Korea, without committing to any date. Despite President Trump's optimism, there is little evidence that North Korea intends to abandon its nuclear weapons capability.

However, North Korea has maintained a moratorium on nuclear tests since the Singapore Summit, destroyed the Punggye-ri nuclear test site (its only known nuclear test site), reportedly dismantled a rocket launching and testing site near Tongchang and begun returning the remains of American soldiers, suggesting a desire to demonstrate progress in upholding its commitments.

The agreement to establish peaceful relations between the US and DPRK has led to ongoing pressure from South and North Korea for a formal peace agreement. While the Korean War of 1950-53 ended with the Armistice Agreement, it was essentially a ceasefire and no formal peace agreement was signed.

Key Issues in the Hanoi Summit

After the first summit, there was considerable criticism within the US that President Trump had made significant concessions without securing substantive commitments from Chairman Kim. The focus of attention in Hanoi is likely to be on the denuclearisation of North Korea, sanctions relief for the Kim regime and a political declaration to end the Korean War.

US officials led by the US Special Representative for North Korea Stephen Biegun have pressed for a roadmap and timeline for denuclearisation, involving 'final, fully verified denuclearisation. This means the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction, their means of delivery and the means to produce them'.

In Hanoi, President Trump is likely to emphasise the progress made so far in getting Pyongyang to uphold its commitments, in contrast to the failed efforts of his predecessors to seek concessions through pressure on the Kim regime.

On 19 February, Trump said that "North Korea and Chairman Kim have some very positive things in mind… but I'm in no rush" on this issue. Pyongyang is likely to focus on the execution of its Singapore commitments and the need for the US to take 'corresponding measures' to respond to its initiatives.

The Singapore Summit's reference to "complete denuclearisation" is likely to be retained rather than a call for "complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearisation". For Trump, denuclearisation is seen as the ultimate objective, not the immediate goal of the negotiations.

Kim's Likely Posture

Chairman Kim will push for the removal of US sanctions and a formal declaration to end the Korean War. President Moon Jae-in of South Korea has been supportive of this approach and has held three summits with Chairman Kim in 2018 (with another summit in Seoul likely to be held soon, the first time Chairman Kim will be visiting Seoul).

One consequence has been a shift in South Korean public opinion towards a more favourable perception of North Korea. This has provided considerable leeway to President Moon in his efforts to serve as a facilitator and mediator. Moon's emphasis is on resolving the DPRK nuclear issue, establishing a permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula, developing a sustainable intra-Korean relationship and creating a new economic community on the Korean Peninsula.

To achieve these objectives, the Moon administration stated that it will take a step-by-step and comprehensive approach, tackling the issues of inter-Korean relations and

the DPRK nuclear threat simultaneously; ensure the stability of its DPRK policy by institutionalising the relationship and laying the foundations for peaceful unification through mutually beneficial cooperation.

Nevertheless, while South Korea could push the envelope in seeking a solution, it is dependent on the willingness of Washington and Pyongyang to negotiate and make concessions.

Outlook for Hanoi Summit

South Korea's stance has influenced the US negotiating strategy. Beigun's recent comment that the US was 'simultaneously looking at ways to improve relations', to create a more stable Korean Peninsula, to advance denuclearisation, and to shape a 'brighter economic future' for the DPRK, suggests that Washington may respond positively.

The US could agree to a peace declaration, leading to a peace treaty involving the US, China, DPRK and ROK adopted by the UN Security Council (as the UN Command was the formal signatory of the Korean Armistice together with the Korean Peoples' Army representing North Korea and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army representing China).

President Trump could agree to the easing of sanctions by exempting the joint ROK/DPRK joint projects at Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Keumgang Tourism Resort from sanctions, which would enable the resumption of operations.

For President Trump, a declaration ending the Korean War would be the signal foreign policy achievement of his first term, which none of his predecessors seemed likely to achieve in the past 65 years. It would also pave the way for his declared intention to reduce, and eventually even eliminate the American military presence in South Korea. A continuation of the freeze on joint US/ROK military exercises is likely if the Summit reaches a positive conclusion from the American perspective.

How Big An Agenda in Hanoi?

Significantly, the US and South Korea have just reached an agreement increasing the South Korean contribution for the US military presence by 8.2 per cent to US$ 924 million for 2019, covering only one year compared to the previous five-year agreement, after ten rounds of negotiations since March 2018. The signal is that the US expects South Korea to pay much more for the US military umbrella in subsequent negotiations.

To achieve its goal of further movement on the denuclearisation issue, the US may make an agreement on a peace declaration contingent on the DPRK taking concrete and additional actions towards denuclearisation within a specific timeframe. Although it is unlikely that Pyongyang will completely forego the security provided by its nuclear shield, the DPRK could make further pledges to destroy its nuclear weapons facilities, dismantle its ICBMs, and to halt further nuclear and missile production.

While this represents a big agenda unlikely to be completed in the course of a two-

day summit in Hanoi, it could point the way to the beginning of a negotiating process. To facilitate such negotiations, Trump and Kim could agree to establish liaison offices in Pyongyang and Washington DC respectively.

Consequences of a Successful Summit

Japan continues to watch the ongoing negotiations closely, concerned that its outcomes could be inimical to Tokyo's security interests. Success in Hanoi will embolden President Trump and increase the pressure on Japan to pay more for a continued American presence.

Japanese nervousness is increased by fears that President Trump will adopt an America First policy aimed at eliminating ICBMs and removing the threat to the United States while allowing short and medium range missiles, which could threaten Japan.

While successful negotiations could lead to North Korea's integration into the wider East Asian community, Japan is concerned that the hope of a less dangerous North Korea is less likely than a weak deal which allows North Korea to retain its weapons of mass destruction and continue to threaten Japan.

As the nuclear weapons capability of North Korea will not disappear, there will be renewed demands from Japanese conservative groups for Japan to move away from its avowed anti-nuclear weapons policy, especially in the context of a Trump-led American phased military withdrawal from bases in South Korea and later Japan.

Over the next decade, this is likely to increase the domestic pressures for an expansion of Japanese military capabilities to include offensive weapons such as ICBMs, strategic bombers and aircraft carriers.

Détente on the Korean Peninsula and a reduction in the American military presence will embolden Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's efforts to revise Article 9 of the Japanese Constitution, which restricts the Japanese military to self-defence and inhibits Japan's participation in collective defence.

Reducing Risk of Conflict

As the reliable ally of North Korea over seven decades, and concerned over the impact of its acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability, China has strongly supported the Trump/Kim meetings. For President Xi Jinping, progress in this area is the one positive aspect in the worsening bilateral relationship.

Bilateral ties have been hit by US actions highlighting conflicts on trade, intellectual property, state subsidies, forced technology transfer, cyber-espionage and restrictions preventing fair market access by foreign companies as well as American paranoia about China's rising influence and growing military, cyber and economic capabilities.

While success for Trump lies in a DPRK agreement to denuclearisation as the goal, his detractors in Washington will continue to claim that he has made too many concessions in return for uncertain commitments by Kim, which could easily be

overturned. For Kim, the summit process has strengthened the legitimacy of his regime and reduced the risk that Trump will push for his removal.

Such an outcome will strengthen the domestic positions of President Trump, Chairman Kim and President Moon. It will diminish the risk of conflict in the Korean Peninsula and create the conditions conducive to the DPRK's integration into the wider East Asian community. Even if the summit is touted as a success by both sides, it is important to remember that the US and North Korea are at the beginning of a process and that there will be many bumps and turns before there is a conclusion to the negotiations.

The alternative is a failed summit, which could cast a shadow, especially over the leadership and authority of the three leaders, and their relationship in the years ahead. The Korean Peninsula will remain a major source of tension in the region.

Barry Desker is Distinguished Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore. An earlier version appeared in The Straits Times on 22 Feb 2019.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg