

Hanoi Summit: A Trump-Kim Fiasco

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After the first Trump-Kim summit in Singapore, much was expected from the second summit held during late February 2019 at Hanoi. The first round was historic but the second round turned out to be a disaster with the summit ended abruptly. After the first summit, North Korea had begun to dismantle a missile engine test stand at Sohae. Post the failure of the second summit, however, some reconstruction has been noticed at this site. Is this symptomatic of the failure of diplomacy or it is a bit premature to write an obituary of peace in the Korean peninsula? This issue brief analyses the ongoing efforts towards resolving the North Korean riddle.

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After a friendly opening at Singapore (June 2018) during the first Trump-Kim summit, much was expected from the second summit held during February 2019 at Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam. While the first round was historic, the second turned out to be a disaster with the summit ending abruptly and talks seeing no progress. After the first summit, North Korea had begun to dismantle a missile engine test stand at Sohae. Post the failure of the second summit, however, some reconstruction has been noticed at this site. Is this symptomatic of the failure of diplomacy or it is bit premature to write an obituary of peace in the Korean peninsula? This issue brief analyses the ongoing efforts towards resolving the North Korean riddle.

Backdrop

Korea was liberated from a harsh Japanese rule when the Second World War ended in 1945. Around the same time, the US was actively interfering in the Korean peninsula to contain the threat of global communism. Eventually, as a part of Cold War era politics in the 1950s, Korea got divided into North Korea and South Korea along the 38th parallel. During the early 1950s, the North launched a surprise attack across the 38th parallel and quickly took over most of the South. At that time, the United Nations arbitrated and tried to arrest this North Korean advance. The troops from the UN side were mostly from the US and some from the UK, while the North was supported by the Chinese Red Army. Finally, an armistice was signed in July 1953 with the line of division remaining at 38th parallel. Since then, the US has remained a security guarantor to South Korea. North Korea on the other hand has a military pact with China, with Russia as its close friend.

During the last six to seven decades, South Korea has made significant technological and economic progress. Moreover, their political system has evolved from a capitalist dictatorship to a full-grown democracy. North Korea, however, has remained a communist/police state with autocratic rulers belonging to the same family for three generations. All these years, it is the 'kingdom' which has been well-off while the rest of North Korea's population lives in a state of misery.

The Problem

The 'dictatorial' government of North Korea has mostly been 'out of tune' with the rest of the world and is under the impression that the world is out to destroy them. They believed that nuclear weapons could be the best deterrents. Former US President George W. Bush had once described North Korea as a state which is at "the crossroads of radicalism and technology." Since the beginning of the 21st century, North Korea has regularly resorted to nuclear and missile blackmail. It is possible that they could have developed these technologies to demonstrate their radicalness.

Today, Pyongyang's existential dilemma could be viewed at different levels. The threat from ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons is the most debated issue, in addition to human rights. Another issue is the totalitarian Communist dictatorship in the region. Authoritarianism wants not only to control the behaviour of the state and individuals, but the mind as well. North Korean leaders following this model spread terror to ensure that the citizens worship the Supreme Leader. This is why North Korea is said to exist in the past as well as in the present. It is difficult for the rest of the world to accept that such a political regime can exist even in the 21st century.

DPRK and WMDs

In spite of various attempts mainly by the US to prevent North Korea from developing the nuclear weapons, their administration succeeded in establishing a military nuclear weapons programme. On January 10, 2003, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), citing certain reasons. It was argued that on 12 December 1985, North Korea entered the NPT with the purpose of realizing international cooperation in the nuclear power industry sector, removing nuclear threats toward them, and making the Korean peninsula a non-nuclear zone. However, owing to US policies, it was becoming difficult for North Korea to make any progress with their nuclear energy programme and hence they were left with no option but to withdraw from the treaty.

North Korea conducted the first nuclear test in 2006, and have till date conducted six nuclear tests in total. They also claim to have conducted a hydrogen bomb test, in addition to producing a miniaturized nuclear warhead that can fit missiles in its inventory. As per estimates by a few experts, North Korea could have already produced fissile material, which will allow it to build between 30 to 60 nuclear weapons. It is expected that North Korea may already have 10 to 20 nuclear weapons on their inventory.

During 2017, North Korea tested several missiles demonstrating the rapid advances of its military technology. Their Hwasong-12 is known to have the capability to cover a distance of 4,500 km (putting US military bases on the Pacific island of Guam well within striking distance). A more advanced system, the Hwasong-14 (this ICBM had its maiden flight on 4 July 2017) can travel a distance of around 10,000 km. In addition, Hwasong-15 that has already been tested is theoretically capable of reaching the continental US. North Korea also has various short and medium missiles in their arsenal which can reach South Korea and Japan.

There are suspicions about North Korean capabilities in regards to their chemical and biological weapons stockpiles. While the country is a signatory to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), it has not signed the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC).

As per an analysis issued by the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey during December 2018/January 2019, North Korea is collaborating with foreign researchers to learn biotechnological skills and build machinery. Experts share the view that it is far more likely that North Korea would use biological weapons than nuclear ones. Some believe that the world has not given enough attention to North Korea's biological weapons programme which is expected to be highly lethal.¹

¹ Emily Baumgaertner and William J. Broad, "North Korea's Less-Known Military Threat: Biological Weapons", New York Times, January 15, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/15/science/north-korea-biological-weapons.html>

North Korea's Nuclear & Missile Jolt

North Korea has been under various types of sanctions for several years. Many countries and international bodies have imposed various sanctions against them since long. The country was under UN imposed sanctions since 1950s, and in 1988, US identified it as a state sponsoring terrorism. There have been few short-lived periods when the economic sanctions on North Korea were relaxed. However, owing to the North Korean nuclear and missile bravado in the 21st century, the state has been under harsh sanctions for last two decades. Obviously, these sanctions are hurting North Korea in a big way.

In 2014, for the first time since 2009, North Korea test-fired two medium-range Rodong ballistic missiles in violation of UN resolutions. These missile tests could be viewed as an initial push from the North Korean side to escalate the crisis. In December 2015, the US imposed additional sanctions on North Korea over weapons proliferation, targeting the army's Strategic Rocket Force, banks and shipping companies. After this, within the same year, UN's Security Council further tightened the sanctions by curbing North Korea's main export, coal, by 60 per cent. North Korea responded to all this by test firing a long-range missile into the Sea of Japan in July 2017.² This test also gave the indirect indication that Alaska was within the reach of North Korean missiles. All these exploits by North Korea to further complicate their situation made even their all-weather friends like China, join the club of countries pushing for sanctions. A verbal war began between the US and North Korean leaderships, with the leaders calling each other names.

The vital question at present is if North Korea is not very keen to undertake any missile or nuclear test then why they could be attempting to redevelop Tongchang-Ri site? There is a great possibility that North Korea would take a position that they want to develop their space programme for the societal needs and hence there is needs to establish a spaceport. In the past it has undertaken five satellite launch attempts since 1998 out of which three were from the Tongchang-Ri site. North Korea had used the Unha series rockets for satellite launches. Unha 1 and 2 rocket based launches were failures while Unha-3 had one failure and one success. Unha series rockets -3 rockets can only loft fairly small satellites into low earth orbits (LEO).³ Hence, there is a need to develop a more powerful rocket which can at least put 20 tones of payload in the LEO. It may be noted that even attempting to launch a satellite would go against the UN sanctions since some components which are required for building a satellite launch vehicle are also used for missile launchers too.

² "North Korea conducts new intercontinental missile test", BBC News, July 28 , 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40757780>

³ Morris Jones, "North Korea's New Rockets", Spacewar, March 11, 2019, http://www.spacewar.com/reports/North_Koreas_New_Rockets_999.html

Diplomatic Overtures

The year 2018 brought with it a fresh beginning. Both South and North Korean leadership began talks to resolve the issue. North Korea broke the ice by sending their team to the Winter Olympics held in South Korea. Finally, in April 2018, North Korean President Kim Jong-un travelled to South Korea to meet President Moon Jae-in for talks. This was followed by Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump's historic meeting at Singapore during June 2018. The meeting was held in a congenial atmosphere with both leaders agreeing to make efforts to end the tense decades-old nuclear stand-off.⁴ However, the meeting turned out to be high on optics and less on substance.

The meeting in Singapore indicated that there is much ground to cover and North Korea could be a tough nut to crack. One positive outcome was that both the leaders agreed that there was no need to take any belligerent position when the issue could be resolved by talking. With Trump and Kim displaying good chemistry, policy-makers from both states started engaging each other constructively. This resulted in a few high-level visits from both the states. A ground was getting prepared for the next Trump-Kim summit. However, there was little clarity with respect to the issues concerning complete and verifiable denuclearization. Trump was more interested in unilateral disarmament, meaning complete denuclearization, while North Korea was keen to have the entire Korean peninsula denuclearised. North Korea is keen to remove the missile defence system meant to provide a nuclear umbrella to South Korea.

It appears that the Hanoi summit, held on February 27–28 (2019), was declared without completing the required ground work. Possibly, Trump thought that a charm offensive could give him the desired results, but that didn't happen and the Hanoi summit failed.⁵ There was, however, a general perception (including that of North Korea) that Trump would be willing to settle for an interim arrangement.

Owing to harsh sanctions, the North Korean people are suffering greatly. While Kim is keen to get the sanctions lifted at the earliest, at the same time, he wants a guarantee that his leadership will not be challenged and there will be no threat to his existence. He wants some tools for bargain in his hand and is not keen on starting the process of immediate total denuclearization. He wants a step by step approach, while the US is probably following what was once described by the North Korean Foreign Ministry after Mike Pompeo's North Korea visit, a "gangster-like" approach.⁶ The US is following an 'all or nothing' strategy. It is likely that Trump realised during the Hanoi summit that he would not get what he wants and hence walked off.

⁴ "Trump-Kim summit: Full text of joint statement of Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un", Straits Times, June 12, 2018, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/document-signed-by-trump-and-kim-in-singapore-summit-says-north-korea-will-work-towards>

⁵ North Korea may ready rocket launch, blames US for summit flop", Straits Times, March 9, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/trump-says-he-would-be-disappointed-if-north-korea-resumed-testing>

⁶ North Korea slams 'gangster-like' U.S. demands after satisfied Pompeo leaves , Reuters, July 7, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-usa/north-korea-slams-gangster-like-u-s-demands-after-satisfied-pompeo-leaves-idUSKBN1JX03B>

What does Failed Diplomacy mean?

Kim is primarily interested in his regime's survival and hence, is unlikely to give-up nuclear weapons at the word 'go'. Trump and his team seem to have overestimated their skills, failing to realise that only military and economic power does not indicate a 'position of strength'. Kim did, in fact, propose dismantling the Yongbyon nuclear complex in exchange for lifting the main sanctions, but Trump refused. Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton and a few others in his administration are known to be hawks on the North Korea issue since decades.

It appears that both Kim and Trump had great expectations from the Hanoi summit, with even the possibility of officially ending the Korean War being talked of. Unfortunately, the summit failed miserably. After abandoning the summit, Trump tried doing some damage control by making statements saying he still has faith in the leadership of Kim, however, it appears to not be working anymore. Kim has already begun giving indications that if not a missile or a nuclear test, he would be launching a satellite to inform the US of his capabilities as well as his intent.⁷

Now, it seems that both camps have hardened their positions. For Pyongyang, a step-by-step process involving give-and-take is essential, but Washington is not keen on offering any immediate reciprocal concessions for the destruction of a few nuclear sites.

What then, does the failure of the Hanoi summit actually indicate? Did the US underestimate the North Korean capability to do a hard bargain? Should Trump have shown more maturity and not left the summit displaying arrogance? Did he not realise that by dumping the negotiations he may have secured political brownie points at home, but failed to save face in front of Kim? Did his backroom boys not tell him that insulting Kim like this lead to a backlash which would not be in the interest of securing lasting peace in the region? Was there no realisation in his camp that pushing for total denuclearisation could actually prove counterproductive? Lastly, is his administration is totally convinced that such a major issue involving several players (like China and Russia) could be resolved bilaterally and that too in such a short span of time?

⁷ North Korea 'preparing rocket launch', images suggest", BBC News, March 9, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47504723>

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The views expressed in this article are solely that of the author.

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