

Korean crisis - The art of no deal: how Trump and Kim misread each other

Saturday 2 March 2019, by [BORGES Julian](#), [TISDALL Simon](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2019).

North Korean despot and US president's wildly different perceptions exposed in Hanoi.

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As with many disastrous second dates, the collapse of Donald Trump's summit with Kim Jong-un was made inevitable by the misreading of each other's intentions at their first encounter.

Since their initial meeting in Singapore last June, the US president had become fixated on what he saw as a close personal bond with the North Korean dictator half his age. He told his supporters: "We fell in love ... He wrote me beautiful letters."

Those hand-delivered missives appear to have flattered Trump without offering concrete proposals of what Kim was going to do as part of a bargain. A joint statement issued in Singapore stated North Korea's commitment to the "complete denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula", which Trump appears to have understood as a pledge of complete unilateral nuclear disarmament.

In North Korea, however, the phrase is a routine regime slogan that refers to a gradual defusing of tensions on the peninsula and phased multilateral disarmament, during which North Korea would be treated as a nuclear power.

For his part, Kim appears to have come away from Singapore interpreting Trump's gushing behaviour as sign of a desperation to strike a deal, which would potentially leave most of his arsenal in place while normalising relations with the US and lifting sanctions.

These wildly different perceptions collided painfully in Hanoi, where the two leaders discovered each other not to be the ideal partner they had previously imagined.

"It was obvious from the beginning that they would get stuck on the questions of how much denuclearisation there should be and how much sanctions relief," said Joseph Yun, former US special representative for North Korea policy now at the US Institute of Peace thinktank. "Both Kim and Trump are now in a very difficult position. I think Trump now has to realise that complete denuclearisation, however charming Kim may be, is not on the cards."

Yun said that Trump's room for manoeuvre was constrained by the timing of the summit, coinciding with a furious denunciation by his former lawyer in congressional hearings. The president's embattled position in Washington meant he had to deliver something spectacular in Hanoi or nothing at all.

"Probably a smaller deal was possible," Yun said. "But in my view Trump had to have a big deal, with

Cohen going on in Washington. If he brought home a small deal he knew he would be heavily criticised.”

Many experts who have been severely critical of Trump’s diplomacy said they thought he had done the right thing by refusing to accept the deal apparently presented in Hanoi by Kim: sanctions relief in return for undertakings to shut down North Korea’s oldest and biggest nuclear weapons complex at Yongbyon.

The two sides dispute the extent of sanctions relief: the US has said Kim wanted complete relief, North Korea has said it was asking for partial relief.

“You can all argue whether this should have been done at a summit at all,” said Joel Wit, a former state department official with long experience of negotiating with North Korea and now a senior fellow at the Stimson Center thinktank. “I wouldn’t have done that deal either. I think it was the right thing to do not to sign.”

Vipin Narang, an expert on nuclear proliferation from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said it was “better that Kim Jong-un didn’t commit to shutting down Yongbyon if he was going to slow-roll it, because committing to it in writing and then leaving himself vulnerable to being accused of violating it sets us on a collision course”.

For the time being, Trump has shown no sign of a backlash against Kim in the face of Thursday’s bitter disappointment. He made clear he still believed in the North Korean despot’s good faith, even in the matter of the brutal and fatal torture of the US student Otto Warmbier in a North Korean prison.

Some had feared that when it became clear Kim had no intention of giving up his nuclear arsenal Trump would resort to the threats and insults which helped bring the two countries to the brink of war in the summer and autumn of 2017.

For all the claims of his ghost-written book *The Art of the Deal*, Trump revealed himself to be a profoundly flawed negotiator who failed to understand his counterpart, and convinced himself only he could clinch an agreement, nuclear experts said.

Stephen Biegun, the US special representative for North Korea, who had taken part in preparatory talks with North Korean officials, was sidelined at the summit, his place at the table taken by the acting White House chief of staff, Mick Mulvaney, who has minimal foreign policy experience.

Biegun’s marginalisation was “incredibly striking”, said Alexandra Bell, a former state department arms control official.

“The president has repeatedly signalled through word and deed that he doesn’t really trust Biegun to lead this process,” said Bell, senior policy director at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation. She recalled Trump’s lack of concern about extensive vacancies at the state department when he said: “I’m the only one who matters.”

“That may be the case to the president, but it means no one can work ably on his behalf,” she added. “Based on his remarks at the press conference, he seemed to intimate that he thought we could secure a grand bargain and declare victory. That’s not how any of this works.”

Julian Borger in Hanoi

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Vietnam summit: North Korea and US offer differing reasons for failure of talks

US president says North Korea wanted all sanctions lifted for only partial denuclearisation, a claim disputed by Pyongyang

North Korea and the US have given differing accounts of why the second summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un ended in failure on Thursday.

The abrupt end to the Hanoi meeting, which was cut short by several hours, was a setback from both leaders who had made long journeys – Kim by rail and Trump by air – in the expectation that a deal was within reach. There are no plans for a third summit, but the US has expressed willingness to continue talks at a lower level.

In his version of events, Trump said the deal had broken down because Kim wanted complete sanctions relief for dismantling the main nuclear complex at Yongbyon, but the US wanted other nuclear facilities, including covert sites, disabled as well.

“It was about the sanctions basically,” Trump said at a press conference in Hanoi. “They wanted the sanctions lifted in their entirety and we couldn’t do that ... Sometimes you have to walk, and this was just one of those times.”

“There is a gap. We have to have sanctions,” he said. “There is a gap. We have to have sanctions and he wants to denuke. But he wants to just do areas that are less important than the areas that we want.”

North Korea disputed Trump’s explanation. At abruptly scheduled midnight press conference in Hanoi, the North Korean foreign minister, Ri Yong Ho, said Pyongyang had only demanded partial sanctions relief in return for closing Yongbyon. He said the US had wasted an opportunity that “may not come again” and Pyongyang’s position would not change even if the US seeks further talks.

Trump however made clear that the status quo will continue, with North Korea continuing to suspend nuclear and missile tests, while the US will not take part in joint military exercises with South Korea, which the US president is opposed to anyway.

“I gave that up quite a while ago because it costs us \$100m to do it. I hated to see it. I thought it was unfair,” Trump said, adding that South Korea should shoulder more of the costs. “Exercising is fun and it’s nice they play their war games. I’m not saying its not necessary. On some levels it is. On other levels it’s not.”

On Friday, South Korea’s president, Moon Jae-in, used a national holiday speech to try to ease any disappointment. “I believe this is part of a process to reach a higher level of agreement. Now our role has become even more important,” he said. “My administration will closely communicate and cooperate with the United States and North Korea so as to help their talks reach a complete

settlement by any means.”

In a press conference after the talks broke down, Trump remained protective of the North Korean leader and the relationship between the two men. “We spent all day with Kim Jong-un,” he said. “He’s quite a guy and quite a character. And our relationship is very strong.”

He even defended Kim over the death of the US student Otto Warmbier, who was sent home from North Korea seriously ill in June 2017. “He says he didn’t know about it and I will take him at his word,” he said.

Trump gave the most detailed public account to date of the central disagreements that have dogged the negotiations. He confirmed that the US side had confronted Pyongyang with US intelligence about covert nuclear facilities outside Yongbyon and demanded they be put on the negotiating table.

“We know the country very well, every inch of that country,” he said, adding that Yongbyon, “while very big, wasn’t enough”.

“We had to have more than that, because there were other things that we haven’t talked about, that we found, that we found a long time ago, but people didn’t know about,” he went on, making clear that one of the sites he was talking about was a second covert uranium enrichment programme. “We brought many points up that I think they were surprised that we knew.”

He said relaxing all sanctions in return for Yongbyon would be meant giving up leverage “that has taken so long to build.”

The collapse of the two leaders’ talks came suddenly. Late on Wednesday night the White House circulated detailed plans for negotiating sessions, a working lunch and a signing ceremony for a joint agreement. When the two leaders reconvened on Thursday morning, however, they appeared sombre and cautious about whether a deal was possible.

A few hours later, the summit was called off. The signing ceremony was cancelled and the official lunch left uneaten. Table settings and name cards went unused in the empty dining hall of the Metropole Hotel, the summit venue, as the leaders made their way back to their own hotels.

The US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, said the breakdown of talks was partly caused by differences over the sequences of nuclear disarmament and sanctions relief. The US wanted North Korea to put its current arsenal, thought to consist of several dozen warheads, some mounted on missiles, on the negotiating table as well, he said.

Pompeo said nuclear negotiations would resume quickly, although no new meetings have yet been scheduled.

Trump flew out of Hanoi in the late afternoon, while Kim stayed in the city for talks with the Vietnamese leadership and will make the 70-hour car and train journey back to Pyongyang at the weekend. It was unclear whether he would stop in Beijing to meet the Chinese president, Xi Jinping.

Trump said he would call his regional allies, the Japanese prime minister, Shinzo Abe, and the South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, as soon as he boarded Air Force One.

The breakdown of the summit is a political disaster for Moon, who had been counting on progress that would lift international sanctions restricting trade and investment between North and South Korea.

A South Korean diplomat said Seoul was stunned by the result. "It was shock. We are trying to figure out what happened," the diplomat said. "We need to watch what happened behind the scenes."

Julian Borger in Hanoi

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Trump was out of his depth in Hanoi. This failure is his greatest flop yet

The blunderer-in-chief has let North Korea's dictator emerge unscathed over his regime's appalling human rights abuses.

Donald Trump's self-reverential style of personalised, fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants diplomacy just crashed and burned in Hanoi. It is fitting, perhaps, that Vietnam - scene of past American humiliations - was the setting for the blunderer-in-chief's greatest flop. Trump tried to wing it in nuclear talks with North Korea's more canny leader, Kim Jong-un, and got what he deserved: precisely nothing. The summit, like last year's effort in Singapore, was a Trump vanity project - and proved a labour in vain.

In principle just about everybody, including close neighbours South Korea, China and Russia, would like to see North Korea's nuclear arsenal brought under international supervision, and preferably eliminated altogether. To make such a mess of things, given this exceptional consensus, is a true measure of Trump's incomparable incompetence. Yet this is barely a surprise. It is entirely of a piece with his amateurish approach to key foreign policy challenges the world over.

Given the lack of progress in preparatory talks, it was a wonder the US went ahead with the summit at all. Pre-meeting media reports, quoting senior officials, suggested growing concern in Washington that Kim had no intention of complying with the core demand for denuclearisation, or of fully listing his nuclear facilities. As it turns out, they were right. But Trump insisted on having his moment.

Trump's advisers were also worried he would make reckless, unilateral concessions, as he did last year when he suddenly cancelled US-South Korean military exercises. Before the summit, and again after it, Trump said he would be content if North Korea merely continued its moratorium on missile and bomb testing.

Talk about giving away the shop. For a man who prides himself on driving a hard bargain, it was remarkably naive.

In truth, Trump made the summit all about him. His main objective was to enhance the delusional image he has of himself as global peacemaker. He firmly believes he deserves the Nobel peace prize. In this year's State of the Union address he loudly praised himself for saving millions of lives by averting a "major war" in Korea. If such a war was ever a real prospect, it was largely because of Trump's panicky response to Kim's 2017 long-range ballistic missile tests. He was out of his depth then, and was so again in Hanoi.

The summit failure is a big setback for South Korea's president, Moon Jae-in, who, notwithstanding Trump's shenanigans, has worked hard to build bridges to the North. But Kim will be more than happy. Thanks to Trump, the process of his international rehabilitation continues - a political coming-out parade that began in Singapore. His standing, at home and abroad, has been further enhanced at no political cost.

While Kim basks in Trump's praise as a "great leader" and "friend", an outmanoeuvred, out-thought US president has been left to trail home with nothing to show. Kim will not worry, for example, that an always symbolic end to the 1950-53 Korean war was not agreed. But he will be delighted the risk of precipitate American military action has further receded. Meanwhile, he can continue his covert nuclear build-up.

On the advice of John Bolton, his national security adviser, Trump resisted Kim's demand that all US sanctions be lifted. But his agreement to continue lower-level bilateral talks - and the de facto "normalisation" of US-North Korea relations that implies - means China, Russia and other countries that are already bypassing UN-led sanctions on Pyongyang will feel free to go further.

Trump's inability to lay a diplomatic glove on Kim in the Hanoi rematch also means North Korea's dictator has again emerged unscathed over his regime's appalling human rights abuses. When it suits him, Trump is quick to use human rights as a stick to beat governments in Iran or Venezuela. In his 2018 State of the Union address, before he got chummy with Kim, Trump declared: "No regime has oppressed its own citizens more totally or brutally than the cruel dictatorship in North Korea."

Trump was right, or at least his speechwriter was. Kim presides over a gulag of forced labour camps of appalling inhumanity. North Koreans are subject to arbitrary arrest, torture and indefinite incarceration without trial. The regime's corrupt and incompetent economic management has caused mass starvation.

Yet in Hanoi, his confected fury forgotten, Trump made no mention of these ongoing abuses, nor did he try to do anything to curb them. When asked about an American student, Otto Warmbier, who was mistreated in a North Korean prison and later died, he absolved Kim of responsibility. Kim, he said, "felt badly" but "didn't know about it". It was another Khashoggi moment - and similarly stomach-turning.

Trump's rightwing nationalistic instincts; his coddling of dictators; his cultivated ignorance of complex, sensitive international problems; and his image-driven refusal to look beyond the next news cycle, have become fixed features of his foreign policy approach.

It is this approach that has given us the appeasement of Vladimir Putin's Russia at Europe's expense, cut-and-run troop withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan, a dangerously obsessive vendetta against Iran, an unconscionable betrayal of the Palestinians, and a chaotic attempt to impose regime change on Venezuela.

Trump's Hanoi bumbling follows a set pattern of unfitness. It is the very opposite of leadership. And it can only give comfort to the enemy.

Simon Tisdall

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- Simon Tisdall is a foreign affairs commentator.
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