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THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

The Second Trump-Kim Summit

by Dr. Alon Levkowitz

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,098, February 27, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Donald Trump-Kim Jong-un summit coming up in Hanoi at the end of this month will focus on finding ways to implement the process that began at the first summit in Singapore. Trump and Kim will try to find a win-win compromise that does not require a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) in the short run. The success or failure of the second summit will influence the South Korean political arena as well.

On February 27-28, 2019, President Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un will meet in Hanoi for the second US-North Korea summit. Both sides are expected to show progress.

North Korea hopes to convince Washington that it is on the right track towards denuclearization in order to persuade Washington that it should ease sanctions on the DPRK and allow South Korea to begin to implement some joint Korean projects that are constrained by those sanctions. For its part, Washington wants to see hard evidence that Pyongyang is taking steps towards denuclearizing and is starting to dismantle its missile and nuclear apparatus.

Washington expects Pyongyang to begin to denuclearize by dismantling its nuclear site facilities and allowing inspections at nuclear and missile sites. One cannot expect Kim Jong-un to dismantle all the nuclear and missile facilities in the short period before the second summit. This process will take time, and will not be as rapid as President Trump tried to suggest after the Singapore summit.

That is why Washington and Pyongyang are looking for a creative solution that will satisfy both sides. They want to create a road map that will allow the DPRK to receive economic assistance and will allow Washington to verify that the process of denuclearization will continue even when some sanctions are lifted.

The big question is, what would each leader consider to be his “Holy Nuclear Grail?” In other words, what would enable each leader to state at the end of the summit that he had achieved his goals? In the past, Washington demanded complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement (CVID) from Pyongyang before lifting sanctions, but in the past few weeks, the tone from Washington has been less harsh. The US is now willing to consider easing sanctions before CVID, provided Pyongyang shows that it has in fact begun to denuclearize.

The second Kim-Trump summit will be watched closely by South Korean President Moon Jae-in. Moon hopes the summit will result in a deal that will allow the South Korean government to implement some inter-Korean projects in North Korea and begin the denuclearization of the DPRK.

Should the second summit fail to achieve denuclearization, criticism among South Korean conservative politicians, analysts, and retired security personnel regarding Moon's North Korean policy is likely to amplify. They oppose Moon's policy because they believe it would allow North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons without giving anything up. They allege that Moon's appeasement policy allows Kim to use Seoul as leverage in Washington.

These critics also take issue with both Moon and Trump on the security issue. They believe that Trump's decision to freeze the joint military exercise with the South Korean army on the grounds that it poses a threat to North Korea – an argument that was reiterated for years by Pyongyang – threatens the security of the Republic of Korea as well as the security alliance with the US.

A failure of the second Kim-Trump summit to achieve a road map towards denuclearization of the DPRK, with a verification mechanism and an easing of sanctions, will affect not just the DPRK and the US but also South Korea. Having said that, a failure will not prevent Pyongyang, Washington, Seoul, and even Beijing to look for other ways to solve this issue.

Dr. Alon Levkowitz, a research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, is an expert on East Asian security, the Korean Peninsula, and Asian international organizations.