



Trump-Kim-Moon: Back to Square One?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Two years after the summits Kim Jong-un attended with Donald Trump and Moon Jae-in, respectively, the three states are almost back to square one. Initially, there was great optimism that it would be possible to dismantle the North Korean nuclear and missile program and achieve peace among all three parties—but misunderstandings by Washington, Pyongyang, and Seoul of one another's goals led to the failure of the process.

On April 27, 2018, Kim Jong-un crossed the demarcation line to South Korea to meet with Moon Jae-in, the South Korean president. As this was Kim's first summit with a South Korean leader, it symbolized a major change in inter-Korean relations. The summit displayed symbols of unity in the Korean Peninsula and created a euphoric expectation that peace in the Peninsula was within reach.

Two months later, on June 12, 2018, Kim Jong-un achieved another huge milestone by becoming the first North Korean leader to meet an incumbent US president. Kim and Donald Trump met in Singapore and signed a joint statement that added another layer of hopeful expectation: that peace could be achieved between North Korea and the US.

Trump and Kim agreed on the goals of the summit, but understood the process differently. From Washington's point of view, the dismantling of the North Korean nuclear and later its missile program was a *sine qua non* that had to be completed prior to the cancellation of US sanctions. On the North Korean side, the lifting of sanctions was a vital part of the negotiation process. Pyongyang was willing to dismantle part of its nuclear and missile apparatus, but expected Washington to lift the sanctions while the dismantling was taking place.

The two leaders met again on February 27-28, 2019, this time in Hanoi, to discuss how to implement the Singapore Declaration. The summit failed, as the states' understanding

of the terms of their agreement did not coincide. Washington and Pyongyang tried to convince one another to follow their preferred path; neither succeeded.

Kim Jong-un achieved one important goal: by meeting with President Trump, he established himself as a legitimate national leader. He failed, however, to convince Washington to lift the sanctions without dismantling his country's nuclear and missile programs. Kim also failed to convince Moon Jae-in to assist Pyongyang in defiance of Washington's restrictions. President Moon understood that whatever his government's own political-ideological agenda might be, he did not have the option of pursuing a policy toward Pyongyang that was contrary to American wishes.

It is now two years since the summits took place and the sanctions on North Korea have not been lifted. Some have even been extended. Kim Jong-un failed not only to have the sanctions revoked but even to mitigate their economic cost. The euphoria and hopeful expectation of the early days of the summits is long gone.

The US presidential election in November of this year is another barrier for Kim. President Trump will not lift the sanctions before the elections without getting partial CVID (complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement) of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile program. Kim cannot deliver this. He understands as well that Seoul cannot assist the North, as doing so would raise the ire of Washington. Kim will simply have to wait and see if Trump stays in the White House or is replaced by Joe Biden.

Pyongyang's decisions to blow up the liaison office in Kaesong and ramp up militant declarations against both Washington and Seoul demonstrate that Kim is trying to draw new red lines despite his very limited response options. Little, then, has changed since the days prior to the first summit. It looks as though Pyongyang, Washington, and Seoul are back to square one.

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