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THE PENINSULA

The New Administration and North Korea: Can Trump and Kim Pick Up Where They Left Off?

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South Korean media have been filled with discussion about what the return to power of Donald Trump in the United States may mean for the Korean Peninsula. High on the list is the possibility that Trump will rekindle his bromance with North Korean autocrat Kim Jong-un, picking up the threads of a bargain that broke down in the Hanoi Summit in late February 2019. Trump himself fueled that speculation with remarks on the campaign trail. "It's nice to get along when somebody has a lot of nuclear weapons or otherwise," Trump said about Kim in July. "He'd like to see me back, too. I think he misses me, if you want to know the truth."

Veteran officials, including former Trump administration officials who were engaged in the talks during his first term, anticipate that the president-elect will want to return to those negotiations at some point.

"It's not a day one issue, probably not even a year one issue, but [Trump] will certainly seek to re-engage with Kim Jong Un," former Trump senior defense official Randall Schriver said on November 21 at the Hudson Institute. Renewed talks "will have different contours to it than the first term, and the two summits in Singapore and Hanoi," Schriver predicted. The second time around, Trump will likely offer to discuss a broader range of issues other than the goal of denuclearization, from economic aid to officially ending the Korean War—an issue that was prominent early in the previous talks.

The bottom line, however, is Trump's own belief that he came tantalizingly close to declaring he had forged peace in Korea. "President Trump wasn't happy that he didn't get a deal and I think he understands that the nuclear issue is extraordinarily difficult to pry them away with diplomacy," Schriver told the Hudson Institute.

"(Trump) is not predictable and he is not constrained by convention," Stephen Biegun, former deputy secretary of state and special representative for North Korea, **told** the Korea Society recently. "To the contrary, he is the guy who says, are you kidding me, this war ended more than 70 years ago and we still have 30,000 troops on the Korean peninsula. What geniuses have been in charge of our North Korea policy for the past 70 years. There is a certain every man common sense in that observation."

Trump's announcement that Alex Wong, who was part of the North Korean negotiating team during the first administration, would serve as deputy national security advisor is being seen by some analysts as evidence of his interest in resuming diplomacy with Pyongyang. "At multiple levels, this supports the thesis that Trump is hot to trot with Kim [Jong Un]," **said** a former senior US intelligence analyst with deep experience on North Korea. "And for better or worse, Pyongyang will read it that way."

Whatever the president may want to do, neither the North Korean regime nor the South Korean government, which played a key role in the talks held during the first administration, seem ready to return to that table. "It will be a very different dynamic than in the first term," says Schriver, who was a part of the negotiating team for both summits between Trump and Kim.

The Lessons of Hanoi

The starting point for a new round of diplomacy will necessarily be where the talks broke down in 2019. US negotiators attempted to get the North Koreans to discuss concrete steps to implement the vague promise of denuclearization made the previous year at the Singapore Summit, which ultimately failed.

The North Koreans "thought the President was desperate for a deal and they were going to save that for the leader-level meeting," Biegun **told** the Arms Control Association in a 2021 interview.

Trump arrived in Hanoi preoccupied with the political situation at home, which was marked by his impeachment process and the impending testimony in Congress of his former lawyer, Michael Cohen. According to former National Security Advisor John Bolton's scathing memoir, Trump was constantly watching Fox News. In preparation for the talks, Bolton and others were encouraging Trump not to make a "small deal," arguing that it would be politically unacceptable in Congress and to US allies like Japan.

Kim offered to trade a shutdown of the well-known nuclear complex at Yongbyon in exchange for a lifting of all economic sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council since 2016, basically covering all the key restrictions on trade and other assistance. The US team understood this amounted to a *de facto* removal of all effective sanctions and did not include secret facilities outside of Yongbyon that would allow the nuclear program to continue. As has been recently confirmed, this included a major enrichment plant at Kangson.

Trump tried to bargain, suggesting Kim accept a somewhat lesser reduction in sanctions, and then proposed eliminating North Korea's long-range missile program, which could reach the continental United States, leaving intact shorter-range missiles that target South Korea and Japan.

"This was beyond doubt the worst moment of the meeting," Bolton wrote in his memoir. "If Kim Jong Un had said yes there, they might have had a deal, disastrously for America. Fortunately, he wasn't biting, saying he was getting nothing, omitting any mention of the sanctions being lifted." Efforts to revive talks failed, including an impromptu summit in June at the DMZ.

Pointing Fingers at Seoul

Could Trump and Kim return to the abortive deal-making of Hanoi?

One significant difference now is the change of government in Seoul. The progressive administration of Moon Jae-in played a crucial role in setting the engagement in motion, intervening repeatedly when it stalled, and shaping the negotiating strategy of the North Koreans. Indeed, US negotiators pointed fingers at the Moon administration for having misread Trump's readiness to make the kind of deal that Kim proposed and for having influenced the North Koreans to take that stance.

Kim's confidence in Hanoi "was the result of the progressive ROK government's efforts to convince Kim that the U.S. would accept this deal," says former senior Department of State official Evans Revere, a veteran of extensive diplomacy with North Korea. "The false picture of success that Seoul presented to the North Koreans resulted in Kim's humiliation in Hanoi. It's no wonder that Kim Jong Un was so angry on the trip home and vented his wrath at the ROK."

If Trump returns to the negotiating table now, however, he will find a South Korean government under President Yoon Suk-yeol that is unlikely to encourage talks with North Korea. The conservative administration in Seoul has taken a tough stance toward the North, and relations between the two Koreas are at a low point.

In two years, however, there could be a change of government in Korea, shifting power back to the progressives.

"President Trump's everyman view that we have to fix this problem aligns with the traditional progressive view that concessions to North Korea are necessary to achieve peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula, to rectify historical division on the Korean peninsula," observes Biegun. "There will be an alignment there."

Kim Is Not Waiting for Trump

The biggest obstacle to a return to the Hanoi bargain may be that Kim is no longer motivated to make this grand bargain.

"This is a Kim Jong Un that is in a different place," Schriver told the Hudson Institute. "He's got more advanced capabilities now." More significantly, he has the backing of Putin and Russia and retains close ties to China. While China and Russia were still largely enforcing

the international sanctions regime at the time of the Singapore and Hanoi summits, that is no longer the case. Both have blocked any further sanctions measures in the United Nations and have lifted economic pressures on Kim's regime.

"Nukes are now part of the regime's DNA and the North Koreans are making steady, impressive progress towards their goal of becoming a full-fledged nuclear power," argues Revere. "The only 'deal' that they **might** be prepared to discuss is one in which they would sit down with the U.S. 'as one nuclear power with another' to discuss 'arms control.'"

In recent important speeches delivered after the US election, Kim offered an image of strength, manifest in the dispatch of more than 10,000 North Korean troops to the Ukrainian war front.

In a lengthy address delivered to army commanders on November 18, Kim linked the war in Europe to the situation on the Korean Peninsula and urged preparation for conflict. "The US-led military alliance is gaining in scope to include Europe and the Asia-Pacific, and the spearhead of its aggression is being directed at our country, which is the rival most hostile to the United States and the longest belligerent state against it," Kim told his military.

In a speech delivered some days later at an arms expo in Pyongyang, Kim provided his "lessons of Hanoi," offering only the co-existence of two nuclear states. "We already did everything possible in the bilateral negotiations with the United States," Kim said, "and what we were eventually convinced of was not the superpower's will to co-exist with us but its domineering stand and unchangeably aggressive and hostile policy towards the DPRK."

In a study published recently by the Middlebury Institute's Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, Siegfried Hecker, former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, and Robert Carlin, a former intelligence specialist and negotiator with North Korea, offered this conclusion:

"There is no way to know at this point how long the North's new policy will last. There should be no mistake—what we've seen since January 2022 is not a tactical feint or an effort by Pyongyang to gain 'leverage.' On the contrary, it has been a fundamental break with the policy of the previous thirty years, the result of a strategic decision certainly by Kim Jong Un but more broadly by the leadership that will have long-term consequences for the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. That is not to argue that Pyongyang won't open the door again to engagement with the United States, but when it does, the door will almost certainly lead to a fundamentally different room."

Concluding Thoughts

What would bring Kim Jong-un back to the negotiating table? "He is willing to accept surrender from Trump," says a veteran North Korea intelligence analyst. "But he is not going to concede anything. He doesn't have to. It is the Americans who have to make the concessions."

What might that be? Simple acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear-weapon state, formalized in some kind of arms control agreement, may no longer be enough. Now, the demand will be US troop withdrawal from South Korea, something that Trump already

had on his agenda at the end of his first term. "If Kim can get those troops out of there, he will be perfectly happy," the former intelligence officer told me. "That is why it is so dangerous."

For now, as Kim wrote Trump in the last of his "beautiful" letters, sent on August 5, 2019, "We are in a different situation and we are not in a hurry."

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Return to the Peninsula

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