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South Korea Can Save the Nuclear Talks
After Hanoi, Back to Seoul
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The failure of the U.S.-North Korean [summit in Hanoi](#) ^[1] has put diplomacy on the back foot. Even a small deal would have been better than no deal at all. But the “maximum engagement” strategy that U.S. President Donald Trump initiated a year ago remains the best approach. For the first time in a decade, when it comes to U.S.-North Korean relations, the arrows are pointing in the right direction: toward reduced risks, confidence building, political normalization, economic integration, and, in the end, denuclearization and peace. The United States, South Korea, and North Korea need to keep the process going. After a failed summit attempt, you can’t hide in your tent. You wait out the bad weather, and then start climbing again.

Disappointment over Hanoi should not obscure an encouraging fact: for the first time in a long while, the governments of the United States and North Korea are negotiating in good faith. Team Trump and Team Kim are looking for practical ways to make serious progress toward peace, normalization, and denuclearization. Since early 2018, they have made a series of compromises. The most significant has been the suspension of North Korean nuclear and missile tests and U.S.-South Korean large-scale joint military exercises. Trump administration officials have probably had as many or more conversations with their North Korean counterparts in one year than Obama administration officials did in two terms. Add the vast improvement in the quantity and quality of contact between Seoul and Pyongyang and that’s a lot of jaw-jaw to counteract the dangers of war-war.

Trump’s liberal critics have skewered him for legitimizing a brutal dictator. But they seem to have forgotten how close Bill Clinton was at the twilight of his presidency to holding a summit in Pyongyang with Kim Jong II. They should heed the words of then-candidate Barack Obama, who in 2008 chided the Bush administration’s foreign policy by arguing, “the notion that somehow not talking to countries is punishment to them...is ridiculous.” Summits did not put Kim in power—his father and grandfather maintained control and “legitimacy” for seven decades without meeting a U.S. President—nor do they keep him there.

Dialogue does, however, allow U.S. diplomats to better understand the problem they are dealing with, form relationships with decision-makers on the other side, and find a path to a negotiated settlement. At the same time, the images of summitry send a positive—and potentially liberating—message to average North Koreans: that the era of hostile relations with the world’s only superpower is coming to a close and they no longer have to live in a fortress state.

Where, then, does the rapprochement process go next? Trump and Kim looked a bit deflated after coming up short at their second summit. Hardliners on both sides now seem to hold the upper hand, with satellite images of North Korea hinting at a resumption of rocket tests and senior officials in Washington warning about the possibility of ramping up sanctions. South Korean President Moon

Jae-in will have to re-energize the process. The two Koreas were ready for phase two of reconciliation, which Moon had hoped to unveil on the heels of a deal at Hanoi. Now push out ahead if he is to unstick Trump and Kim.

Fortunately, there is a ready means to do so: Moon should urge Kim to make his visit to Seoul as soon as possible. Kim agreed to visit the South during Moon's visit to Pyongyang in September. For South Koreans to see images of Kim in their capital, coming in a spirit of peace and engaging with the citizenry just as he has done in Singapore and Hanoi, could be transformative. There will be protests, to be sure, but they will only add to the significance of Kim's willingness to cross the border, signaling to South Korea and the world that something new—and historic—is at work.

While hosting Kim, Moon can set about bridging the gap that was exposed in Hanoi. One or both sides at the summit apparently asked for too much, too soon. Kim wanted the last sanctions imposed by the five UN Security Council resolutions removed. Trump wanted North Korea's entire nuclear, missile, and bio-chemical weapons program dismantled, along with an inventory that U.S. inspectors could use to check its destruction. It remains unclear who overreached first; as in the great Kurosawa film *Rashomon*, the truth of the matter might be inseparable from the perspective of the observer. In any case, the perfect got the better of the good. So it falls to Moon to rediscover the possible.

One way around the impasse could be to offer Kim security guarantees as part of an incentive package. The proposed deal at Hanoi may have suffered from the underlying asymmetry between the security sacrifices Kim was asked to make and the economic rewards Trump was prepared to extend. At a midnight press conference the day the summit collapsed, the North Korean foreign minister hinted as much when he [said](#) [2], "We proposed the removal of partial sanctions as corresponding measures. This is because it would still be more demanding for the U.S. to take action in the military field, even though the security guarantee is more important to us in the process of taking the denuclearization measure." North Korea, in other words, seems to see a U.S. security guarantee as the ultimate goal, but recognizes that it's a big ask. Moon should pull gingerly on this thread. Getting the balance of economic and security elements right will not be easy. In Hanoi, Trump may have stressed North Korea's potential for economic success too hard, thinking that carrots alone could entice Kim toward denuclearization. Trump is right that Kim wants economic development. But although Kim's desire for economic growth has helped lay the groundwork for the peace and denuclearization process, that process still has to be a gradual one. The Chinese have a proverb about the farmer who pulls on rice shoots in order to make them grow faster. Moon can help put the shoots back in the soil.

By mediating between Trump and Kim, Moon can clear the way for the anticipated working-level efforts by the U.S. State Department. Perhaps an interim deal can be announced and implemented without the fanfare of a summit. Or maybe the next summit can be a trilateral one, with leaders of the United States and the two Koreas meeting together for the first time to declare the end of war and jumpstart the next phase of the peace and denuclearization process.

Commentators shouldn't pat Trump on the back for being willing to walk away or slap him on the wrist for going to Hanoi in the first place. The negotiations have created a rare opportunity to shift the trajectory of North Korea and its relations with South Korea, the United States, and the rest of the world. Trump tried to press the accelerator in Hanoi and hit the curb. But slamming the brakes on diplomacy, or even throwing it into reverse, would be tragic error. Slow and steady wins the race.

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